

# Reducing your risk of dementia




Public Health  
England



Alzheimer's  
Research  
UK

The Power  
to Defeat  
Dementia



This booklet is for anyone interested in reducing their risk of dementia.

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The information given here does not replace any advice that you may be given by doctors or other healthcare professionals, but you may find it helpful.

It was updated in July 2017 and will be reviewed in July 2019. Please get in touch if you'd like a version with references or in a different format.

Dementia describes a group of symptoms, including memory loss, confusion, mood changes and difficulty with day-to-day tasks.



### What is dementia?

There are many causes, including:

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**Alzheimer's disease**

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**vascular dementia**

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**dementia with Lewy bodies**

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**frontotemporal dementia.**

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Mixed dementia can also occur, particularly Alzheimer's with vascular dementia or dementia with Lewy bodies. You can request more information about dementia using the form at the back of this booklet.

### What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is something that increases your likelihood of developing a condition. Some risk factors, like age and genetics, can't be changed. There are others, including smoking, diet and not getting enough exercise, that you could try to do something about.

We know that many people live a healthy and active life but still develop dementia. However, research suggests some cases of dementia could be avoided by helping people address health and lifestyle factors. Here we outline some of the risk factors for dementia, including those we can and can't change, and suggest ways to maintain good brain health.

## Risk factors for dementia

The biggest risk factor for dementia is age. The older you are the more likely you are to develop the condition, but it is not an inevitable part of ageing.



Aged 65 to 69

Aged 85 to 89

About two in 100 people aged 65 to 69 years have dementia, and this figure rises to 19 in 100 for those aged 85 to 89.

The diseases that lead to dementia are complex, and there is still a lot to learn about the risk factors. In most cases, it is likely that our age, genes, medical history and lifestyle all contribute to our risk of the condition. However, certain black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups may be more likely to develop dementia than others.

## Does dementia run in the family?

As dementia is so common, many of us will have a relative living with the condition – but this does not mean we will develop it too.

If you have a parent or grandparent with Alzheimer's disease, then your risk may be slightly higher than someone with no family history. However, except in rare cases, the genes we inherit from our parents may only have a small effect on our risk of developing dementia.

In rare cases, someone may inherit a faulty gene that causes a specific form of dementia. Some rare forms of early-onset Alzheimer's disease and frontotemporal dementia are caused by faulty genes and can run in families. Symptoms often start in the 30s, 40s or 50s.

To find out more about rare, inherited forms of dementia you can speak to your doctor or contact us for further information.



## Can I reduce my risk of dementia?

We can't change our age or our genes and there is currently no way we can completely prevent dementia. However, there may be some simple steps we can all take to help lower our risk.

Risk factors for cardiovascular disease (like heart disease and stroke) are also risk factors for dementia, so what is good for your heart is good for your brain. Leading a healthy lifestyle and taking regular exercise will help lower your risk of cardiovascular diseases, and it's likely you'll be lowering your risk of dementia too, particularly vascular dementia.

### For good heart health:



don't smoke



eat a healthy balanced diet



keep active and exercise regularly



only drink alcohol within Chief Medical Officers' guidelines



maintain a healthy weight



keep cholesterol and blood pressure under control.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle in your forties and fifties seems to be particularly important for helping to lower your risk of dementia.

## NHS Health Checks

The NHS Health Check is a free check-up of your overall health. It can help you reduce your risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, stroke and dementia. If you are aged 40-74 and do not already have any of these conditions, you will be invited for a check-up every five years.

At the NHS Health Check, a doctor or nurse will:



ask you some simple questions about your lifestyle and family history.



measure your height and weight.



check your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

The doctor or nurse will go through the test results with you and give you advice to help you stay healthy.

If you are outside the age range and worried about your health, you can request a health check-up at your doctor's surgery. You can find more information at [www.nhs.uk/nhshealthcheck](http://www.nhs.uk/nhshealthcheck)



## Smoking and dementia

There are many good health reasons to stop smoking as it's linked to multiple medical conditions including cancer, heart disease, stroke and more. There is also evidence that smoking can increase your risk of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease.

Getting expert help from your local stop smoking service can boost your chances of success by up to four times. The **NHS Smokefree National Helpline** is free to call on **0300 123 1044** or talk to your GP for advice. You can find out more at [www.nhs.uk/smokefree](http://www.nhs.uk/smokefree)

It's never too late to stop smoking. Quitting greatly improves your chances of enjoying a disease-free, healthy old age.

## Keeping physically active

Regular physical activity can have many health benefits, including the prevention and management of over 20 long-term conditions, reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing. It can also help you maintain a healthy weight, reducing your risk of type 2 diabetes and other conditions.

While research is underway to investigate a direct effect of exercise on dementia risk, medical conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes are known risk factors for dementia (see page 08). Therefore staying active may not only help maintain a healthy body but could have knock-on benefits for brain health too.

Being active needn't mean going to the gym or running a marathon. You are more likely to stick with it if you find activities you enjoy. There might be activities you can take part in with other people, like walking, dancing or cycling. Keeping active with others is a good way to encourage each other and make it a social occasion.

There are many ways to build physical activity into your weekly routine. Just getting off the bus a stop or two earlier could help you do more walking. It's also important to avoid spending long periods sitting down, so try to get up and move around regularly. Any activity is better than none!

Each week, try to do:

Moderate activities

You will breathe a little faster but still be able to talk.



150 minutes (e.g. 30 minutes on 5 days)



OR

Vigorous activities

These make you breathe fast and you will find talking difficult.



75 minutes (e.g. 15 minutes on 5 days)



OR a combination of both

As well as these you should include:

Strengthening activities



Twice a week



AND

Activities to improve balance and coordination



Twice a week



Aim to be active every day and avoid sitting for too long at a time.

Mental activity and wellbeing

Several studies have suggested a link between mentally-stimulating leisure activities and a lower risk of dementia.

Others have linked spending more time in education with a lower risk. It's not clear which activities may be most beneficial but it's a good idea to do things you enjoy, whether that's reading, crosswords or playing an instrument.

Keeping mentally active by learning new skills or joining clubs can also be a good way to connect with other people and improve mental wellbeing, helping you to feel happier and more positive in life.



## Healthy eating

Use the Eatwell Guide on page 15 to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.

Foods like sausages and other processed meats, butter and cakes are high in saturated fat. This can raise cholesterol levels and cause you to put on weight, increasing the risk of heart disease and other health problems linked to dementia.

Eating too much sugar can also lead to weight gain, and may increase the risk of type 2 diabetes. Try to eat sugary snacks such as sweets, chocolate, cakes and fizzy drinks less often and in small amounts.

Some fat in our diet is important, particularly unsaturated fat found in oily fish, nuts, seeds and avocados. Oily fish, like salmon and sardines, contains omega-3 fatty acids. While these are an important part of our diet, current evidence does not support the use of omega-3 or other food supplements to prevent a decline in memory and thinking skills.

**Older people may have a smaller appetite and eat less. It may be harder to maintain a balanced diet with enough vitamins and minerals. Contact your doctor's surgery if you need advice about healthy eating.**





If you drink alcohol there are many good health reasons to keep your consumption low. Alcohol is linked to a number of medical conditions including cancer.



## Drinking alcohol

For your overall health, the best advice is to follow the Chief Medical Officers' low-risk guidelines. This means not regularly drinking more than 14 units a week for both men and women. People who drink as much as this should spread their drinking over three or more days, but also have alcohol-free days each week.

While there is little evidence that alcohol causes Alzheimer's disease, it is linked with other types of dementia. Long-term heavy drinking is known to cause alcohol-related dementia, including Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome (WKS). WKS is caused by a lack of vitamin B1. Early treatment with this vitamin can reverse the symptoms, but without treatment the condition can lead to permanent memory loss. If you are concerned, talk to your GP for advice.

1 unit



Half a pint (almost 300ml) of normal strength beer, cider or lager (for example, 3.5% ABV)

1.5 units



A small (125ml) glass of wine (12% ABV)

1 unit



A pub measure (25ml) of spirits

## Other diseases and medical conditions

There is evidence that the following conditions can increase the risk of dementia:

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**Parkinson's disease**

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**stroke**

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**type 2 diabetes**

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**high blood pressure**

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**depression**

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**Down's syndrome**

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**mild cognitive impairment (MCI)**

Early memory and thinking problems considered worse than those associated with normal ageing.

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Each year, 5-10% of people who receive a diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) in the clinic or in research studies go on to develop dementia. However most people with MCI find their memory problems do not get worse while others find their memory returns to normal.

For advice on these conditions, you can talk to your doctor or contact us for a list of organisations and support groups that can help.



## Head injuries and dementia

Some studies have suggested that a serious head injury or trauma could increase the risk of developing dementia, while others have not found this link. There is a specific form of dementia associated with damage from repeated head traumas, called dementia pugilistica. This condition is believed to affect around 20% of retired professional boxers.

Outside the boxing ring, the term chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is used to describe long-term damage to the brain caused by repeated head injuries. Several contact sports' governing bodies are now undertaking research in this area, and have introduced new safety measures in recent years.



Alzheimer’s Research UK has funded over **£8.3 million** of pioneering research into the prevention of dementia.

We have also launched a Prevention and Risk Reduction Fund to answer the biggest questions in prevention. We’re the charity leading the way in dementia research and we will not rest until people are free from the fear, harm and heartbreak of dementia.

We passionately believe that dementia can only be defeated through research. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we will continue to support pioneering studies into risk reduction.



**Find out more**

If you have questions about dementia research or want to find out more about how to get involved, contact our **Dementia Research Infoline** on **0300 111 5 111** or email **infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org**

The Infoline operates 9.00-5.00pm Monday to Friday. Calls cost no more than national rate calls to 01 or 02 numbers and should be included in any free call packages.



**Send me more information**

For free information, simply complete this slip. You can drop it straight in a post box or put it in an envelope labelled with the freepost address overleaf. Alternatively, phone us on **0300 111 5555**.

**I would like to know more about**

Dementia: causes, symptoms and diagnosis (SCIHIAAD)

Caring for someone with dementia: organisations that can help (SCIHCARE)

Genes and dementia (SCIHIGENE)

The latest dementia research (SMTHINK)

Name

Address

Email

We’d like you to be the first to know about the latest research and how your support makes a difference, as well as ways you can get involved and help fund our life-changing work. We’ll keep your information safe and never sell or swap it with anyone.

Let us know how we can contact you (tick below):

Post  Email  Telephone  Text message

You can change how we talk to you at any time, by calling **0300 111 5555** or emailing **enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org**

Our Privacy Notice can be found at **www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/privacy-policy** and explains how we will use and store your information.



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**2**



Freepost RTYR-ZUUZ-AULL  
Partridges  
3 Eagle Avenue  
Magnetic Park  
Desborough  
NN14 2WD

## Top tips for a healthy lifestyle:



don't smoke



control high blood pressure



control blood glucose level if you have diabetes



keep cholesterol at a healthy level



only drink alcohol within CMOs' guidelines



eat a healthy balanced diet



maintain a healthy weight



keep physically and mentally active



take time for your mental wellbeing

# We are the UK's leading research charity aiming to defeat dementia.

We welcome your comments to help us produce the best information for you. You can let us know what you think about this booklet by contacting us using the details below.



## Contact us

Alzheimer's Research UK  
3 Riverside, Granta Park, Cambridge CB21 6AD



## Supporter care

T: 0300 111 5555  
E: [enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org](mailto:enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org)



## Dementia Research Infoline

T: 0300 111 5 111  
E: [infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org](mailto:infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org)

[www.alzheimersresearchuk.org](http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org)



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