

# Reducing your risk of dementia



Public Health  
England



**Alzheimer's  
Research  
UK**

Make breakthroughs possible

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

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 September 2019 and will be reviewed in September 2021. Please get in touch if you'd like a version with references or in a different format.



## What is dementia?

Dementia is a word used to describe a group of symptoms, including memory loss, confusion and mood changes, that make day-to-day life more difficult. Dementia is not a disease in itself.



There are many causes of dementia, 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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A person may have more than one type of dementia, for example Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. This is called mixed dementia. You can request information about different types of 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 we can try to do something about.

We know that many people live a healthy and active life but still develop dementia. However, research suggests that around a third of cases of dementia may be due to factors that we could change. Here we outline some of the risk factors for dementia, including those we can and can't change, and suggest ways to look after our health and reduce our risk of dementia.

## 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 cause dementia are complex, and there is still a lot to learn about the risk factors. In most cases, our age, genes, medical history and life choices all contribute to our risk of developing the condition. However, certain black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups may be more likely to develop dementia than others, due to their higher risk of conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes.

## 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 get it too. Directly inherited dementia is rare.

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

In very 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 these can run in families. Symptoms of these genetic forms of dementia often start in the 30s, 40s or 50s.

To find out more about genes and dementia, or about rare, inherited forms of dementia, 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 are some simple steps we can all take to help lower our risk.

Risk factors for cardiovascular disease (like high blood pressure and stroke) are also risk factors for dementia, so what is good for your heart is good for your brain. Looking after your health, cutting out smoking and being physically active on a regular basis will help lower your risk of cardiovascular diseases. It's likely you'll be lowering your risk of dementia too, particularly vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

### For good heart health:



**don't smoke**



**maintain a healthy weight**



**keep cholesterol and blood pressure under control**



**eat a healthy balanced diet**



**be active and exercise regularly**



**drink fewer than 14 units of alcohol per week.**

Some research has found that identifying and treating high blood pressure in midlife may reduce the risk of dementia. If you are concerned about your blood pressure, or haven't had it checked for a while, you can have it monitored at your doctor's surgery or at some pharmacies.

While it's never too late to make positive changes, keeping your heart healthy 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 cardiovascular disease, you will be invited for a check-up every five years.

At an NHS Health Check, you will:



**be asked some simple questions about your health and family history.**



**have your height and weight measured.**

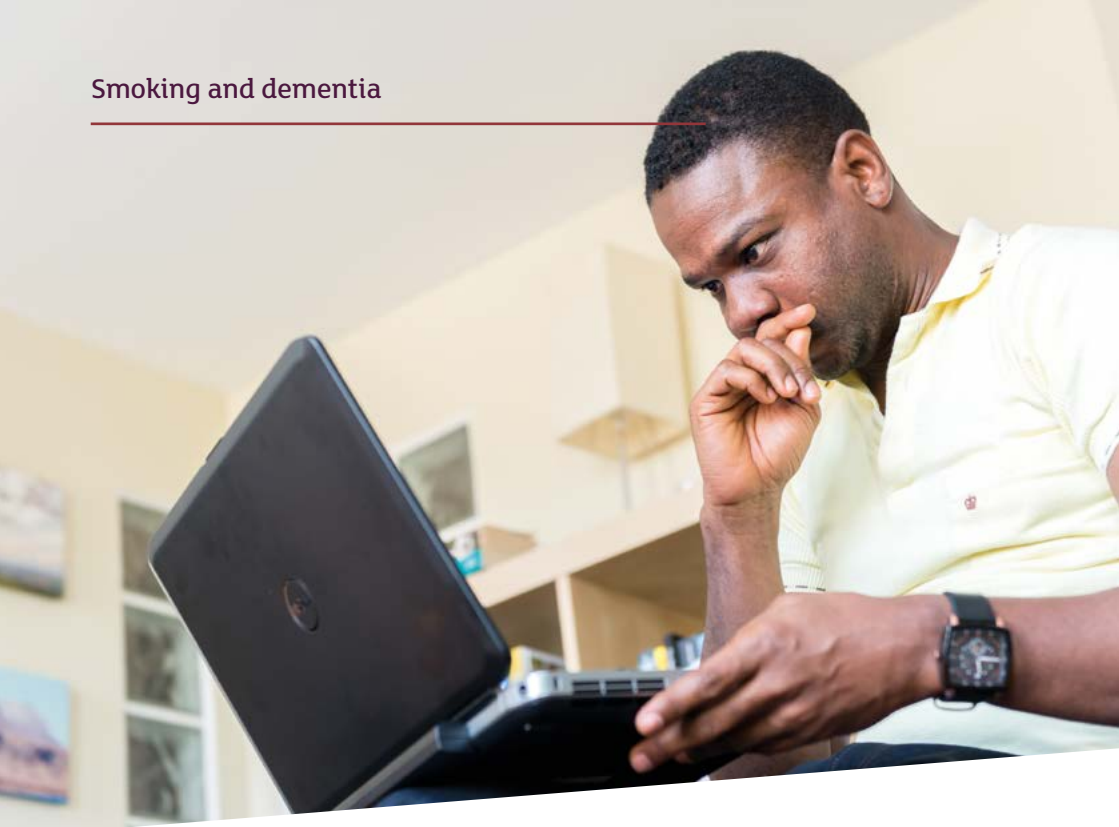


**have your blood pressure and cholesterol levels checked.**

The results from your Health Check will be shared with you along with advice to help you stay healthy.

If you are outside the age range for an NHS Health Check, you can use the Heart Age tool on the NHS website for advice about looking after your health.

If you are over 75 you can request a Health Check from your doctor. Some pharmacies also offer check-ups. 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 high blood pressure. There is also evidence that smoking increases your risk of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Getting expert help from your local stop smoking service can boost your chances of giving up smoking successfully by up to three times. The **NHS Smokefree National Helpline** is free to call on **0300 123 1044** or talk to your doctor 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 staying healthy in later life.

## Keeping physically active

Regular physical activity can have many health benefits, including the prevention and management of over 20 long-term conditions, as well as reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing.

It can also help you maintain a healthy weight, reducing your risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Research has found that people who are physically active have a lower risk of memory and thinking problems. Staying physically active also reduces the risk of other health conditions like high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes, which are known risk factors for dementia (see page 08). Therefore, staying active not only helps maintain a healthy body but can help to keep our brain healthy too.

Being active needn't mean going to the gym or running a marathon. You are more likely to form healthy habits 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. For example, just getting off the bus a stop or two earlier could help you do more walking.

Any activity is better than none, more is better still.

Each week, try to do:

Strengthening activities



At least two days a week



**AND**

Activities to improve balance and coordination (over 65s)



At least two days a week



As well as these you should include:

**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**



**OR** a combination of both

**Aim to be active every day. Try not to spend too long sitting, but if you have to, then break it up with activity of any kind.**

## Mental activity and wellbeing

Research has linked staying mentally active to a lower risk of memory and thinking problems. Other studies have linked spending more time in education with a lower risk.

It's not clear which activities may be most beneficial but doing things you enjoy, whether that's reading, crosswords, singing or playing an instrument, will help to keep you mentally active.

Research has linked social isolation to a higher risk of dementia, although we still need to understand why. Keeping socially active by connecting with other people or joining clubs can be a good way to feel happier, healthier and more positive in life.







## Drinking alcohol

There are many good health reasons to keep an eye on how much alcohol you're drinking. Drinking alcohol is linked to many medical conditions including cancer.

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

Some research has found a link between regularly drinking too much alcohol and an increased risk of dementia. Long-term heavy drinking is known to cause specific alcohol-related dementia, including Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome (WKS). WKS is caused by a lack of vitamin B1 (also called thiamine). 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 doctor 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, many people with MCI find their memory problems do not get worse while others find their memory returns to normal.

Research has suggested a link between hearing loss and the risk of developing dementia. Work is underway to understand more about this relationship and whether wearing hearing aids can reduce risk in people with hearing loss.

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 research has suggested that a serious head injury or trauma could increase the risk of developing dementia. There is a specific form of dementia associated with damage from repeated head traumas, called dementia pugilistica. This condition is believed to affect around two in 10 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.

## Research

Alzheimer's Research UK has funded over

# £10.8 million

of pioneering research into the prevention of dementia.



We have also launched a Prevention and Risk Reduction Fund to understand more about how people can reduce their risk of dementia. This has funded a project investigating whether adults at high risk of cardiovascular disease, and therefore dementia, can be supported to adopt a healthier diet and become more physically active. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we will continue to support pioneering studies into risk reduction and make breakthroughs possible.



### 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 and drop it straight in a post box. Alternatively, phone us on **0300 111 5555**.

### I would like to know more about

Dementia: causes, symptoms and diagnosis (SCIHIAAD)

Support for people affected by dementia: organisations that can help (SCIHICARE)

Genes and dementia (SCIHIGENE)

The latest dementia research (SMTTHINK)

Name

Address

Email

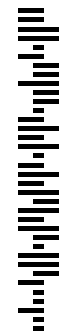
We'd like you to be the first to know about the latest research and how your support makes a difference, as well as ways you can get involved and help fund our life-changing work. We'll keep your information safe and never sell or swap it with anyone.

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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## Top tips for looking after your health:



don't smoke



control high blood pressure



control blood glucose level if you have diabetes



keep cholesterol at a healthy level



drink fewer than 14 units of alcohol per week



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 dementia research charity dedicated to making life-changing breakthroughs in diagnosis, prevention, treatment and cure.

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

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### Supporter care

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### Dementia Research Infoline

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



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