REDUCING YOUR RISK OF DEMENTIA
INTRODUCTION

Just as we can protect other areas of our health, we can take steps to keep our brains healthy and reduce our risk of developing dementia later in life. Research has shown that our health in our 30s, 40s and 50s can have a particularly large impact on our dementia risk. However, it’s never too early or late to start thinking about our brain health.

This booklet aims to provide an overview of why people may develop dementia and what we can do to reduce our risk. It’s for anyone who is worried about themselves or somebody else, or for people who want to know more about risk factors for dementia.

The information here does not replace advice that doctors, pharmacists, or nurses may give you. If you are worried about your health, including memory and thinking problems, speak with your doctor as soon as possible. This booklet was updated in September 2023 and is due to be reviewed in September 2025. It was written by Alzheimer’s Research UK’s Information Services team with input from lay and expert reviewers. Please get in touch using the contact details below if you’d like a version with references or in a different format.

ANY QUESTIONS

If you have questions about dementia or dementia research you can contact the Dementia Research Infoline on 0300 111 5111 or email infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org or write to us using the address on the back page.
WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

The word dementia describes a group of symptoms, including problems with memory, thinking and speaking as well as behavioural changes. The diseases that cause dementia are not a normal part of ageing.

There are different diseases that cause dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease, vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and frontotemporal dementia. You can request more information about different types of dementia using the contact details at the back of this booklet.

If you are experiencing symptoms of dementia, it’s important to speak with your GP who can carry out some tests to find out what might be causing them. For more information, request our booklet ‘Getting a dementia diagnosis’.

WHAT IS A RISK FACTOR?

A risk factor is something that increases our likelihood of developing a condition like dementia. Some of these, like our age and genes, we can’t change.

However, research suggests that up to 40% of cases of dementia are linked to risk factors we have some control over. This means that there are things we can do to protect the health of our brains.

For people who would like to protect their brain health, this booklet contains information about some of the changes we can make to keep healthy and reduce our risk of developing dementia.
RISK FACTORS FOR DEMENTIA WE CAN’T CHANGE

Our age
The biggest risk factor for dementia is age. The older we are, the more likely we are to develop a disease that causes dementia, but these diseases are not a normal part of ageing.

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.

Our genes
Research has shown that the genes we have can affect our risk of dementia. As dementia is so common, many of us will have a relative living with the condition – but this doesn’t mean we will get it too.

Directly inherited dementia is very rare, accounting for about 1% of all cases. This is where multiple people in the same blood line are affected by the same disease, like Alzheimer’s or frontotemporal dementia, often in their 40’s and 50’s. In these rare cases, there is an obvious pattern of a parent passing it on to their child (or children) throughout every generation of a family.

For most of us, our risk of dementia is made up of many complex factors, including our age, environment, lifestyle, health and our genes. Many of us may carry common risk genes that slightly increase the risk of developing dementia – but the majority of these genes only increase this risk by a very small amount. So while the risk genes we carry might tip the balance towards dementia, carrying one doesn’t mean someone will definitely develop the condition, as other important factors affect our risk too.

People who carry common risk genes for Alzheimer’s disease can still reduce their risk. Research has found that dementia rates were 32% lower in people with a high genetic risk who had a healthy lifestyle, compared to those with a high genetic risk and an unhealthy lifestyle. This suggests that lifestyle changes can benefit us regardless of whether we carry a risk gene for Alzheimer’s disease.

Research is ongoing to find out whether this is the case for other types of dementia, such as vascular dementia. However taking steps to improve our brain health is still important and has wider health benefits too.

Our ethnicity can also change our risk. For example, some Black and Asian people have a higher risk of developing conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes. These conditions can then increase the risk of developing dementia.

To find out more, order our free booklet ‘Genes and dementia’ using the contact details on the back page.
WAYS TO REDUCE OUR DEMENTIA RISK

Some people may find adopting some of the suggestions in this booklet easier than others. But remember, even making a couple of changes can go a long way to improve your health, and it’s likely you’ll be reducing your dementia risk too.

Keep your heart healthy

What is good for our heart is also good for our brain health! That’s because the brain is heavily dependent on a good blood supply to remain healthy. Doing things to look after our health can help lower our risk of cardiovascular diseases, and our risk of dementia too.

For a healthy brain and heart:

• don’t smoke
• keep cholesterol and blood pressure under control
• be active and exercise regularly
• maintain a healthy weight
• eat a healthy balanced diet
• drink less alcohol.

Being physically active

Regular physical activity can have many health benefits, such as helping to prevent and control many long-term conditions including dementia, 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 - which are themselves risk factors for dementia.

Being active doesn’t have to involve going to the gym or running a marathon. You are more likely to be physically active more often if you find activities you enjoy doing. 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 to exercise more often and make it a social occasion.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

EACH WEEK, TRY TO DO:

STRENGTHENING ACTIVITIES
On at least two days every week.

AND

IF YOU’RE OVER 65
Activities to improve balance and coordination – on at least two days every week.

YOU SHOULD ALSO INCLUDE:

MODERATE INTENSITY ACTIVITIES
150 minutes (e.g. 30 minutes on 5 days)
You will breathe a little faster but still be able to talk.

OR

VIGOROUS INTENSITY ACTIVITIES
75 minutes
These make you breathe fast and you will find talking difficult.
OR a combination of both.

Any activity is better than none, but the more we do the better. 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.
EATING A BALANCED DIET

The Eatwell Guide on page 16 shows what a balanced diet typically looks like and can guide us on what food choices to make.

Eating too much saturated fat and sugar can increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases and dementia. High fat and sugary snacks such as sweets, chocolate, biscuits and fizzy drinks should be an occasional treat and only eaten 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 a healthy diet, research is ongoing to see if taking omega-3 supplements has any effect on the risk of dementia.

EATING TOO MUCH SATURATED FAT AND SUGAR CAN INCREASE THE RISK OF CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASES AND DEMENTIA.

A Mediterranean-style diet that is low in meat and dairy, but rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, cereals, beans, nuts, and ‘healthy’ fats like olive oil, has been linked to a range of health benefits including improved brain health. However, further evidence is needed to find out more about whether it can directly reduce dementia risk.

Older people may have a smaller appetite and eat less. It may be harder to maintain a balanced diet with enough vitamins and minerals. You can speak to your doctor or a registered dietitian if you need advice about healthy eating.

alzheimersresearchuk.org
The Eatwell Guide helps you get a balance of healthier and more sustainable food. It shows how much of what you eat overall should come from each food group.
**DRINKING ALCOHOL**

Heavy drinking can damage the brain and is related to an increased risk of many conditions including dementia, cancer, stroke and heart disease.

- **1 UNIT**
  - Half a pint of beer, cider or lager (300ml 3.5% ABV)

- **1.5 UNITS**
  - A small glass of wine (125ml 12% ABV)

- **1 UNIT**
  - Pub measure of spirits (25ml)

The Chief Medical Officer’s low-risk guidelines recommend that you avoid drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week. It’s better to spread what you drink each week over at least three days, with several drink-free days each week. Research has found a link between regularly drinking more than the recommended level of 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 and stopping drinking the condition can lead to permanent memory loss. If you are concerned about alcohol consumption you can talk to your doctor for advice.

**QUITTING SMOKING**

If you smoke, quitting is one of the most significant steps you can take in boosting your heart and brain health.

Smoking is linked to multiple medical conditions including cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure and dementia, particularly Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia.

Getting help from your local stop smoking service can greatly boost your chances of giving up smoking successfully. The [NHS Smokefree National Helpline](https://nhs.uk/smokefree) is free to call on 0300 123 1044 or talk to your doctor for advice. You can find out more at [nhs.uk/smokefree](https://nhs.uk/smokefree).

*IT’S NEVER TOO LATE TO STOP SMOKING. EVEN IN LATER LIFE, QUITTING CAN SUBSTANTIALLY REDUCE YOUR RISK OF DISEASE.*
KEEP YOUR MIND ACTIVE AND WELL

Research has found that regularly challenging your brain and staying mentally active can help protect your brain health as you age, lowering your risk of memory and thinking problems.

Researchers think that mental activity helps to build your ‘cognitive reserve’. This is your brain’s ability to cope and keep working, even in the face of damage from diseases like Alzheimer’s.

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

There is evidence linking social isolation and loneliness to a higher risk of dementia, although research is still ongoing to understand why this relationship exists. Keeping socially active by spending time with other people or joining clubs can be a good way to feel happier, and more positive in life, and to look after our brain health.

HEAD INJURY

Some research has suggested that a serious head injury or repeated concussion could increase the risk of developing dementia. Research is ongoing to find out how brain injuries lead to the development of diseases like Alzheimer’s.

There is a specific form of dementia associated with damage from repeated head traumas, called dementia pugilistica.

The term chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is also 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.
OTHER MEDICAL CONDITIONS

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

- mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and thinking problems that are worse than those expected for someone’s age.
- high blood pressure
- hearing loss
- Parkinson’s disease
- stroke
- type 2 diabetes
- depression
- Down syndrome

Managing existing conditions, or reducing your risk of some of these may also reduce your risk of dementia.

Each year, 5-15% of people who receive a diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) 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 found that managing high blood pressure in midlife may reduce the risk of dementia. It’s important to have your blood pressure checked every five years if you are over the age of 40, you can have it checked at your doctor’s surgery or at some pharmacies.

Research has found a link between hearing loss in mid to late life and the risk of developing dementia. Hearing loss could be a risk factor in itself, or it could increase the risk of developing dementia by making it harder for people to stay connected to the world around them.

Some research has suggested that hearing aids may reduce this added risk. Therefore, it is important to have your hearing checked regularly from mid-life. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) provide a free hearing check online: rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/take-free-hearing-check/

You can contact the RNID 0808 808 0123 or information@rnid.org.uk or your doctor for information and advice about hearing loss.
NHS HEALTH CHECKS

The NHS Health Check is a free check-up of your overall health offered to those living in England and some areas of Scotland.

The check aims to support you to 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. If you live in an area not covered by the NHS health check, and have concerns about your brain health or general health, you can talk to your doctor about how to address this.

Some pharmacies also offer check-ups. You can find more information at nhs.uk/nhshealthcheck

IF YOU ARE OVER 75 YOU CAN REQUEST A HEALTH CHECK FROM YOUR DOCTOR.
RESEARCH

Alzheimer’s Research UK has funded over £7 million of research into the prevention of dementia. This includes projects to better understand the link between sport, head injury and dementia risk.

We have also funded one of the largest risk studies to date called, Insight 46. This project has followed a group of people since their birth in the same week in March 1946 to tease apart why some people may go on to develop dementia and others not. Our Think Brain Health campaign helps to turn research findings into practical steps that we can take to protect our brain health throughout life and help reduce our risk of developing dementia.

The campaign is built around three simple rules for better brain health; Love your heart, Stay sharp and Keep connected, and more than 1 million have visited our brain health hub so far. To find out more, and to complete the quick Think Brain Health Check-in, visit thinkbrainhealth.org.uk.

But we will not stop there. With your support, we’re empowering people to reduce their risk of dementia, and investing in research to lead the search for a cure.

We are Alzheimer’s Research UK. We exist for a cure.
TOP TIPS FOR LOOKING AFTER YOUR BRAIN 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
- have your hearing checked regularly
- take time for your mental wellbeing.

You can explore your brain healthy habits and discover more tips to look after your incredible brain via our thinkbrainhealth.org.uk website.
Alzheimer’s Research UK is the UK’s leading dementia research charity. We provide free dementia health information, like this booklet and others.

If you would like to view, download or order any of our other booklets please use the details below. If you’d like to help us review and improve our booklets, visit alzres.uk/reviewer

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