

Reducing your risk of dementia



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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 late to start thinking about our brain health.

The information given here does not replace any advice that you may be given by doctors or other healthcare professionals. It was updated in September 2021 and will be reviewed in September 2023.

Please get in touch if you'd like a version with references or in a different format.

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

What is dementia?

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 many 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 details at the back of this booklet.

If you are experiencing symptoms of dementia it's important to speak with your GP who can run tests to find out what might be causing them.

What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is something that increases your chances of developing a condition like dementia. Some of these, like our age and genetics, we can't change.

However, research suggests that up to 40% of dementia cases of dementia are linked to modifiable factors we can influence ourselves.

For those who would like to improve their brain health, here we look at some of the changes we can make to keep our brains healthy and to reduce our risk of developing dementia.

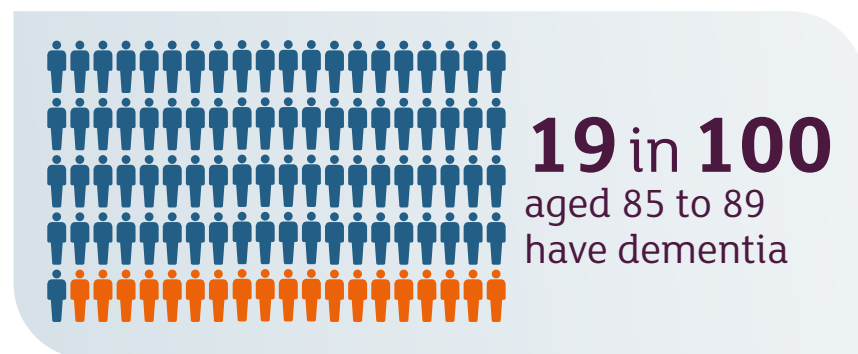
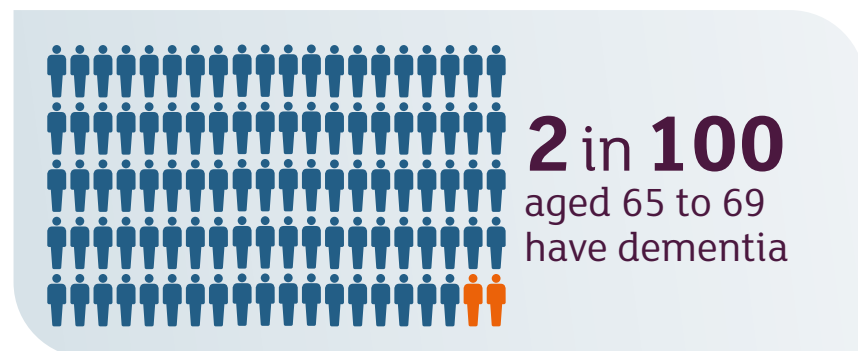


Risk factors for dementia we can't change

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.



Risk and genetics

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.

Our risk of dementia is made up of many complex factors, including our age, environment, lifestyle, health and whether we carry any risk genes. Many of us may have risk genes for diseases that cause dementia.

While these genes may increase our chances of developing dementia, having them does not mean someone will definitely get the condition because there are many other important factors that affect our risk too. Research has found that people who carry common risk genes for Alzheimer's disease can still reduce their risk by looking after their brain health.

Dementia rates were 32% lower in people with a high genetic risk of Alzheimer's that had a healthy lifestyle, compared to those with a high genetic risk and an unhealthy lifestyle. This important finding suggests that lifestyle changes can benefit us regardless of our genetic risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Our ethnicity can also change our risk, with certain black and Asian minority ethnic groups having 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 about genes and dementia or about rare inherited forms of dementia, contact us for further information.

Ways to reduce our dementia risk

Some people may find adopting the suggestions in this booklet easier than others. But making even 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 hearts is good for our brain health! Looking after your health will help lower your risk of cardiovascular diseases, and your risk of dementia too.

For a healthy brain and heart:



Don't smoke



Keep cholesterol
and blood pressure
under control



Be active daily
and exercise
regularly



Maintain a
healthy weight



Eat a healthy
balanced diet



Drink fewer
than 14 units of
alcohol per week



Being physically active

Regular physical activity can have many health benefits, such as the prevention and management of many long-term conditions, including dementia. It also helps to reduce stress and improve mental wellbeing. Being physically active can also help you to maintain a healthy weight, reducing your risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease which are also risk factors for dementia.

Being active doesn't have to involve going to the gym or running a marathon. You are more likely to exercise 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 can make it an enjoyable a social occasion and is a good way to encourage each other to exercise more often.

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

Recommendations for physical activity

Any activity is better than none, but the more we do the better.

Every week try to do:



Strengthening activities

At least two days a week



Activities to improve balance and coordination

At least two days a week (over 65s)

You should also include:



30 minutes
Moderate intensity activities 5 days a week



These will make you breathe a little faster, but you should still be able to talk.

OR



15 minutes
Vigorous activities 5 days a week



These make you breathe much faster and you will find talking difficult.

OR a combination of both.



Eating a balanced diet

The Eatwell Guide on page 12 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 our 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 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 contain omega-3 fatty acids. While these are an important part of our diet, research is ongoing to see if the use of omega-3 supplements can help reduce the risk of dementia and is not yet conclusive.

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.

Eatwell Guide

Check the label on packaged foods

Each serving (150g) contains

Energy	Fat	Saturated	Sugars	Salt
1046kJ 250kcal	3.0g	1.3g	34g	0.9g
	LOW	LOW	HIGH	MED
13%	4%	7%	38%	15%

of an adult's reference intake
Typical values (as sold) per 100g: 697kJ/ 167kcal

Choose foods lower
in fat, salt and sugars

Use the Eatwell Guide to help 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.



Water, lower fat milk, sugar-free drinks including tea and coffee all count.

Limit fruit juice and/or smoothies to a total of 150ml a day.



Eat less often and
in small amounts

Per day 2000kcal 2500kcal = ALL FOOD + ALL DRINKS

Drinking alcohol

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

The Chief Medical Officer's low-risk guidelines recommend both men and women should not regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week. If you do drink, try to spread out alcohol consumption over at least three days, with several drink-free days each week.

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, called 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 your alcohol consumption, you can 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 unit

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



1 unit

A pub measure (25ml) of spirits



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 is free to call on **0300 123 1044** or talk to your doctor for advice. You can find out more at www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/

It's never too late to stop smoking, even in later life, quitting can reduce your risk of disease significantly.

Keeping your mind active and well

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

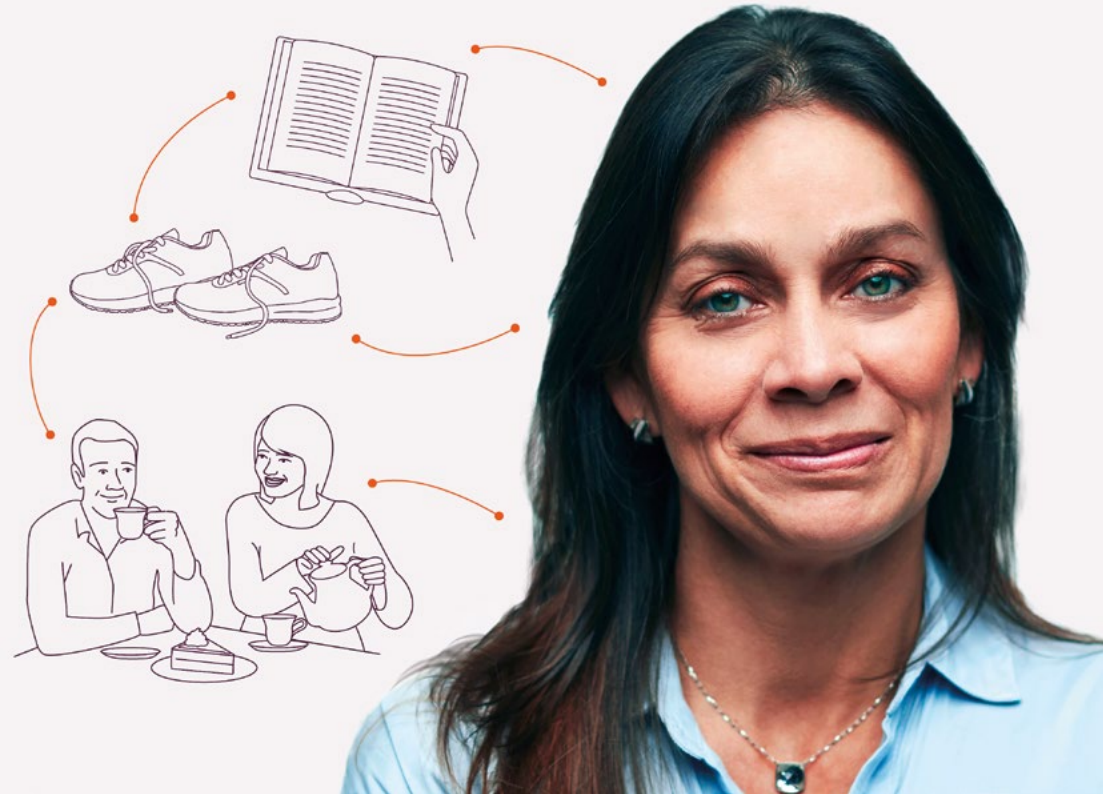
Researchers think that mental activity helps to build your 'cognitive reserve'. This is your brain's ability to cope and keep working, even in the face of damage from diseases like Alzheimer's.

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.

Research has linked 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.



Keep your mind active by doing things you enjoy such as crosswords, puzzles, or reading, and seeing the people you love.



Other medical conditions

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

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

Research has found that identifying and treating 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 monitored at your doctor's surgery or at some pharmacies.

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 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: www.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.



Regularly have your blood pressure and hearing checked from mid-life.



Head injury

Some research has suggested that a serious head injury, trauma or repeated concussion might increase the risk of developing dementia.

Research is ongoing to find out how brain injuries could 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.

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 www.nhs.uk/nhshealthcheck.

Top tips for looking after your health:



Don't smoke



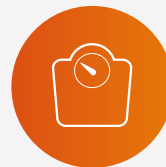
Control high blood pressure



Control blood glucose level if you have diabetes



Eat a healthy balanced diet



Maintain a healthy weight



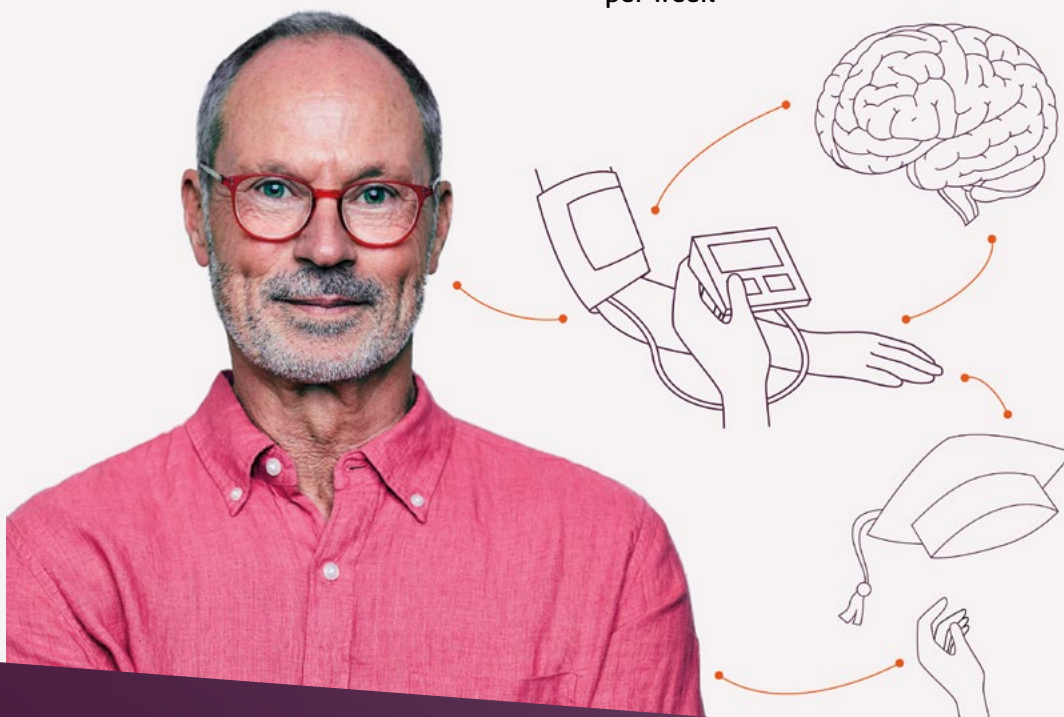
Keep cholesterol at a healthy level



Drink fewer than 14 units of alcohol per week



Keep physically and mentally active



Taking part in research

Through research we'll bring about breakthroughs that will change lives, but scientists need your help.

People with and without dementia can take part in dementia research, to help us understand more about dementia risk and risk reduction.

You can register to take part at www.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk or by calling **0300 111 5111**.



Still have questions?

If you have questions about dementia or dementia research, or want to find out more about how you can get involved in studies, contact the **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.

Interpreter services are available.

0300 111 5 111



Research

Alzheimer's Research UK has funded over **£7 million** of research into the prevention of dementia.

We 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.

Alzheimer's Research UK is the UK's leading dementia research charity dedicated to making life-changing breakthroughs in diagnosis, prevention, treatment and cure.

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 details below.

Contact us

0300 111 5111

info@alzheimersresearchuk.org

Alzheimer's Research UK

3 Riverside, Granta Park, Cambridge CB21 6AD

Visit

www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/dementia-information

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Make
breakthroughs
possible



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