



Risk Factors

What is a risk factor?

Anything that can increase a person's risk of developing dementia is labelled a risk factor. None of the risk factors mean that a person will necessarily develop dementia. However, avoiding risk factors decreases the probability of developing dementia.

Here is a list of risk factors that increase the likelihood of developing dementia¹:

- Genetic predispositions
- Age
- Sex (depends on the dementia, usually woman)
- Low levels of formal education
- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- Problems with cholesterol
- Obesity and lack of physical activity
- Diabetes
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Head injuries
- Depression²
- Social isolation²
- Hearing loss²

What is the best prevention?

There are some factors that you cannot change, but some that you can. Therefore, the best prevention would be to act on the risk factors that can be modified. Adopting a healthy lifestyle may delay, slow down, or even prevent the progression of dementia.

Here are seven ways to reduce the likelihood of developing dementia:

1. Care for your cardiovascular health
 - Track your numbers and keep them in the recommended ranges: track your blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, and weight.
2. Be physically active
 - Regularly engage in moderate to vigorous physical activities.
3. Eat Healthy
 - Follow a healthy diet by eating well-balanced meals and reducing processed food consumption.
4. Be social
 - Stay connected socially and decrease social isolation.
5. Challenge your brain
6. Protect your head from injuries by wearing a helmet when you are playing sports
7. Avoid excessive alcohol consumption and stop smoking

¹ Most of the research establishing possible links between a risk factor and the development of dementia has been done on Alzheimer's Disease and Vascular Dementia, the two most common types of Dementia. However, these risk factors seem to also apply for other types of dementia.

² It is yet unclear if depression is a risk factor or rather an early symptom of dementia. It is yet unclear if social isolation on its own is a risk factor. It is also unclear if hearing loss is a risk factor or rather an effect of the brain damage causing the symptoms of dementia.



It is better to address multiple risk factors at the same time. Studies have found that combining many lifestyle interventions (physical activity, nutritional changes, management of cardiovascular risk factors, mental stimulations and social activities) improved overall mental abilities significantly.

Remember that it is never too early or too late to focus on your brain health.

Guidelines

Be physically active

Physical activity is described as any movement that increases heart rate and breathing.

To safely adopt a healthier lifestyle, consult your doctor before changing any physical activity routines. It is also important to start slowly and to gradually increase the amount of physical activity.

To achieve health benefits, it is recommended that adults over the age of 65 do at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of moderate to vigorous aerobic physical activity per week, also known as cardio. Ideally, this would be in periods of 10 minutes at a time. Muscle strengthening activities as well as exercises to enhance balance are also recommended to prevent falls.

Have a healthy diet

No magical ingredient or nutrient will protect a person from developing dementia. Supplements and vitamins should never be taken to replace other medications prescribed by your doctor or as a substitute for a healthy diet. Eating one type of "good food" excessively or "compensating" with supplements will not counterbalance an otherwise unhealthy eating habit.

Rather, reducing processed foods to a minimum and increasing the intake of fruits and vegetables as much as possible is recommended.

Stay mentally active

A person can stay mentally active by participating in any mentally stimulating activity like puzzles, learning a new skill, or taking up a hobby like playing a musical instrument.

Research suggests that social isolation is probably a risk factor for dementia. Social isolation may lead to a faster decline in mental abilities. Therefore, challenge your brain by doing mentally stimulating activities with a friend or a family member.

Things to remember:

- There is no cure for dementia.
- Research and clinical trials are underway to identify new treatments for dementia. Until then, we know we can improve quality of life by addressing modifiable risk factors.
- Avoiding risk factors increases the probability of preventing, delaying or slowing down the progression of dementia.
- Be physically active.
- Have a healthy diet, but remember that no magical ingredient or nutrient will protect a person from developing dementia
- Stay mentally active
- Contact the Dementia Society. No One Should Face Dementia Alone™

References

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- Livingston, G., et al. (2017). *The Lancet*, 390(10113), 2673-2734
- Kivimäki, Mika, and Archana Singh-Manoux. (2018) *The Lancet* 391.10130: 1574-1575.