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National Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month

What You Can Do to Reduce Your Risk

June is National Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month: worldwide, *50 million* people are affected with Alzheimer's and other dementias, *5.8 million* in the United States alone. Alzheimer's is the *6th* leading cause of death in the US. Unfortunately, there is currently no cure for Alzheimer's, nor is there one single cause. This disease is likely caused by multiple factors; genetics, lifestyle and environment. Though many of these causes cannot be mitigated (age and genetics), new evidence is emerging that proposes we can influence some factors.

Dementia is not a specific disease, it is a term that describes a group of symptoms related to a decline in thinking, memory or reasoning. Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia, with other causes being vascular dementia, and dementia with Lewy bodies.

Risk Factors

Age- The biggest risk factor for Alzheimer's is age, with most diagnosed being 65 and older. Every five years after the age of 65 your risk factor doubles and by age 85 the risk of being diagnosed with Alzheimer's is 33%.

Demographics- Certain populations, such as Latinos (1.5x) and African Americans (2x) are more likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's. While researchers are not sure why this is, it is speculated that these populations' increased risk for vascular disease is related to their increased risk for Alzheimer's. Additionally women are more likely to develop Alzheimer's than men.

Family history- If you have had a family member diagnosed with Alzheimer's, you have a greater risk of developing the disease yourself. However, this does not guarantee you will develop the disease.

Head Injury- There is a link between future risk of dementia and head injuries and traumatic brain injuries. Always wear your seatbelt, wear a helmet when playing sports or riding a bike, fall-proof your home.

Heart-to-Head Connection- There is a strong correlation between heart health and brain health. This makes sense as the brain is supplied nutrients from a vast network of blood vessels stemming from the heart. The risk of dementia and Alzheimer's increases with conditions that damage this network of blood vessels, such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

While many of the previous risk factors listed are not manageable, there are a few things we can effect; diet and exercise.

Exercise- A regular exercise routine has shown it may be a beneficial approach to lowering your risk of Alzheimer's and dementia. Regular exercise improves brain health by increasing blood flow and oxygen to the brain. Regular exercise also can decrease the risk of heart disease and other diseases of the cardiovascular system which slows blood flow to the brain.

Diet- There is evidence that currently shows eating a heart healthy diet can help protect your brain. This consists of abstaining from tobacco, limiting intake of alcohol, saturated fats and added sugars, and eating plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Researchers from the Chicago Health and Aging Project developed a study of risk factors impacting cognitive decline and dementia. With over 20 years' worth of data collected, results so far have indicated that specific dietary patterns may significantly lower the risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Researchers created the MIND Diet, which is a combination of the DASH diet and the Mediterranean diet.

Vegetables (2+ servings/day) - At least one green leafy vegetable a day; spinach, kale, Swiss chard.

Berries (2+ servings/day) - Strawberries, blackberries, raspberries etc... are loaded with antioxidants. Blueberries may potentially be the most beneficial.

Whole grains (3+ servings/day) - Whole wheat or whole grain bread and pastas, brown rice, quinoa are a great source of fiber which can help lower your bad cholesterol.

Nuts (5 +servings/wk.) Seafood (1+serving/wk.)- Fatty fish like salmon and mackerel, and especially walnuts are a good source of omega-3 fatty acids, which have shown beneficial in brain health.

Poultry (2+servings/wk.)- Reducing your red meat intake will help decrease your saturated fat intake.

Source: <https://www.eatrightpro.org/news-center/nutrition-trends/health-promotion/the-mind-diet>

<https://www.alz.org/>