

Health

Avoiding dementia



Kathryn Borg

There is no doubt dementia needs to be given more exposure, and more help should be given to people desperately trying to cope with family and friends suffering from either early onset dementia or fully developed Alzheimer's.

While it may be too late for those already suffering these conditions, recent research shows that dementia may be avoidable to some extent.

You owe it to yourself to take precautions to try to ensure that this mentally debilitating disease does not affect you in later years.

The term dementia, which describes the decline in mental abilities such as thinking, remembering

and reasoning, is fast becoming a major threat to human health.

During the past two years I have written two articles regarding dementia. One compared dementia to the incidence of cancer; the other discussed living with a person suffering from dementia. The aim of this article is not to discuss symptoms, but to look at some simple steps we can take to try to avoid developing dementia.

• The first, most obvious step is to keep the mind active. Mental stimulation can help to ward off dementia. The ongoing Einstein Aging Study started in 1980 in the US has found that elderly people with hobbies such as reading, or playing

board games or musical instruments, were significantly less likely to have Alzheimer's or any other type of dementia. In addition, higher levels of education and lifelong learning also appear to have the effect of protecting the brain.

• Exercise, as always, is vital. In an international review of the literature up to December 2005, Dutch scientists from the Lifestyle and Health Research Group in Utrecht concluded that aerobic exercise is good for the brain and the body. Eight studies involving 670 adults aged 55 and over, found that aerobic activities such as running and cycling significantly increased cardio-respiratory fitness. This

improvement coincided with better mental function.

Interestingly, when compared with people who do not exercise, and others who followed a yoga or strength-based programme, those who undertook aerobic exercises had improved motor function, cognitive processing speed, memory and auditory and visual attention.

• Heart-related health factors appear to predispose people to dementia. In a 40-year study, raised cholesterol levels in mid-life dramatically increased the risk of Alzheimer's and vascular dementia later in life.

• Other research linked dementia to high blood pressure, obesity and insulin resistance. In particular, those in their 40s who carry a lot of weight around their middle have a threefold higher risk of developing dementia in their senior years. These studies suggest that controlling your weight, blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol can help.

• Eating the right fats is vital. However, it is important to understand the difference. Research has shown that people who eat a lot of animal fats (saturated fat) have an increased risk of cognitive decline. Meanwhile, eating high level of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats leads to a higher intake of omega-3 and a reduction in this risk.

"Eating fish or seafood once a week can reduce the risk of dementia by 30 per cent"

The latter fats come from foods such as olive oil, nuts, avocados, safflower oil, and seafood. In fact, eating fish or seafood at least once a week can reduce the risk of dementia by about 30 per cent. It is better to opt for oily fish and those that do not risk containing mercury.

• Staying socially connected or having a good social support system appears to play an important role in maintaining a healthy mind. The evidence suggests that those who have the least social interactions also have the highest incidence of dementia.

• Exposure to heavy metals such as aluminium and mercury has been implicated in dementia. In addition, occupational studies show that those who are regularly exposed to pesticides have a greater likelihood of developing Alzheimer's. Using natural, non-toxic alternatives can help prevent the condition.

• Food antioxidants such as vitamins C and E appear to lower dementia risk. Of more than 5,000 adults aged 55 and over, those who ate lots of foods containing these vitamins had a nearly 20 per cent lower risk of Alzheimer's. Smokers in particular benefited, with a risk reduction of about 40 per cent.

• Getting enough selenium is also important. In a study of 2,000 rural Chinese aged 65 and over, those who had the lowest lifelong selenium levels scored the worst in cognitive tests.

There are various drugs linked to incidences of dementia, however, supplementing with various nutrients can help to stave off cognitive decline.

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