

Alzheimer's disease is devastating, but several studies show promise that certain lifestyle factors could delay or prevent development of the disease. Research in this field is ongoing, but what experts do know is that the cause of Alzheimer's is complex, and seems to be caused by a number of factors including genetic makeup, environment, life history, and current lifestyle.

According to experts at the Alzheimer's Association*, these prevention strategies could be beneficial:

Be Heart Smart

Some of the strongest current evidence links brain health to heart health. The risk of developing Alzheimer's or vascular dementia appears to increase as a result of many conditions that damage the heart or blood vessels. These include high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes and high cholesterol. Some autopsy studies show that as many as 80 percent of individuals with Alzheimer's disease also have cardiovascular disease.

Stay Physically Active

Aerobic exercise improves oxygen consumption, which benefits brain function; aerobic fitness has been found to reduce brain cell loss in elderly subjects. Even stronger evidence suggests exercise may protect brain health through its proven benefits to the cardiovascular system. Walking, bicycling, gardening, tai chi, yoga and other activities of about 30 minutes daily get the body moving and the heart pumping.

Physical activities that also involve mental activity – plotting your route, observing traffic signals, making choices – provide additional value for brain health. And doing these activities with a companion offers the added benefit of social interaction.

Adopt a Brain-Healthy Diet

Like exercise, diet may have its greatest impact on brain health through its effect on heart health. Manage your body weight for overall good health of brain and body. A long-term study of 1,500 adults found that those who were obese in middle age were twice as likely to develop dementia in later life.

Those who also had high cholesterol and high blood pressure had six times the risk of dementia. However, HDL (or “good”) cholesterol may help protect brain cells. Use mono- and polyunsaturated fats, such as olive oil, for example. Try baking or grilling food instead of frying.

Current research suggests that certain foods may reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, and appear to protect brain cells.

- In general, dark-skinned fruits and vegetables have the highest levels of naturally occurring antioxidant levels. Such vegetables include: kale, spinach, brussels sprouts, alfalfa sprouts, broccoli, beets, red bell pepper,

- onion, corn and eggplant. Fruits with high antioxidant levels include prunes, raisins, blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, raspberries, plums, oranges, red grapes and cherries.
- Cold water fish contain beneficial omega-3 fatty acids: halibut, mackerel, salmon, trout and tuna.
 - Some nuts can be a useful part of your diet; almonds, pecans and walnuts are a good source of vitamin E, an antioxidant.

Stay Socially and Mentally Active

A number of studies indicate that maintaining strong social connections and keeping mentally active as we age might lower the risk of cognitive decline and Alzheimer's.

So stay socially and mentally engaged in activities that stimulate the mind and body:

- Stay active in the workplace
- Volunteer in community groups and causes
- Join bridge clubs, square dancing clubs or other social groups
- Travel
- Stay curious and involved — commit to lifelong learning
- Read, write, work crossword or other puzzles
- Attend lectures and plays
- Enroll in courses at your local adult education center, community college or other community group
- Play games
- Garden
- Try memory exercises

*www.alz.org