

Healthy brain, healthy life

How to reduce your risk
of developing dementia



Dementia Australia is the source of trusted information, education and services for the estimated half a million Australians living with dementia, and the almost 1.6 million people involved in their care. We advocate for positive change and support vital research. We are here to support people impacted by dementia, and to enable them to live as well as possible.

No matter how you are impacted by dementia or who you are, we are here for you.

For further information and enquiries please contact:

National Dementia Helpline
1800 100 500

Find us online
dementia.org.au

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Your brain

The brain is an incredible organ. It is made up of many different parts, which work together to keep you alive and carry out everyday tasks and functions.

Keeping your brain healthy is essential for living a fulfilling, healthy and long life. In fact, scientific research suggests that a brain-healthy lifestyle can reduce your risk of developing dementia later in life.

Whether you are old, young or in-between, there are simple changes you can make to improve and protect your brain health.

It is never too late to get started.

Your brain and ageing

As we age, changes occur in our brain that can affect our memory and thinking. **This is normal.**

Common changes can include:

- forgetting names
- losing things
- forgetting things
- forgetting directions
- forgetting appointments
- difficulties completing familiar tasks
- changes in mood and personality.

Factors that can affect memory and thinking:

- being tired or feeling dehydrated
- feeling stress, grief, pain or anxiety
- some medications
- infections, acute illness or nutrient deficiencies
- depression
- hormonal changes
- sensory impairment.

All these things can and do happen, even in younger people. In many cases, there are things that you can do to reverse, manage or resolve these changes.

When you should be concerned

When changes in memory or thinking regularly affect daily life, you may need further support.

Changes might include:

- trouble remembering the day and date
- trouble remembering recent events
- problems handling financial matters
- difficulty following and joining conversations, particularly in groups
- losing interest in activities you usually enjoy.

One reason for these changes could be dementia.

Dementia is not a normal part of ageing.

If you are experiencing some of these changes frequently, you should see your doctor sooner rather than later.



Understanding dementia

Dementia describes a collection of symptoms caused by diseases affecting the brain.

Common diseases include:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia
- Frontotemporal dementia
- Lewy body dementia.

These diseases cause a progressive decline in a person's thinking skills. This includes their memory and thinking, language and problem-solving abilities.

Over time, parts of the brain become damaged, which affects a person's ability to function as they previously did.

This is not a normal part of ageing.

Can you prevent dementia?

There is no certain way to prevent dementia. There are also some risk factors you cannot control, such as getting older, genetics and family history.

However, there are many health and lifestyle factors that we can modify and manage to **reduce our risk** of developing dementia or delay the onset of symptoms.

It is never too late to make a change

Being brain healthy is important at any age but particularly when you reach mid-life.

We can be doing things to improve our brain health at any age, not just when we get older.

Reducing your risk of dementia

There are health and lifestyle factors that contribute to between 35% and 50% of dementia cases worldwide. These factors include:

- cardiovascular health conditions
- physical inactivity
- hearing loss
- sleep disturbance
- poor diet
- low levels of complex mental activity or stimulation in early life
- depression
- social isolation.

The good news is, all these factors can be minimised, modified or improved on. By incorporating simple changes into your everyday life, you can lower your risk of developing dementia.

Risk reduction for dementia focuses on being brain healthy. You can do this by **creating a healthier heart, body and mind**. The earlier you can adopt these changes, the better.



Looking after your heart

Many people are unaware of the connection between heart health and brain health.

The latest research shows that cardiovascular conditions, or those that affect the heart and blood vessels, are linked to a higher risk of developing dementia later in life.

These conditions include:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- high cholesterol
- type 2 diabetes
- obesity
- heart disease
- smoking.

These conditions are often linked with lifestyle factors such as physical inactivity and/or a poorly balanced diet.



Ways to improve your heart health

Get regular health check-ups

Monitor your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose levels, especially if you have a family history of cardiovascular conditions.

Maintain a healthy weight

Develop eating patterns which include a healthy, varied diet and portion control. Speak to a health professional if you need help losing weight.

Stop smoking – it is never too late!

There are many resources to help you quit, including nicotine replacement therapies, gums, patches or sprays. Get started by speaking with your doctor.

Limit alcohol intake

Excessive alcohol consumption over time can result in brain damage that produces symptoms of dementia. If you drink alcohol, stick to the recommended Australian guidelines of no more than two standard drinks on any one day, and at least two alcohol-free days per week.

Smoking affects both the heart and brain

It increases the risk of heart disease, stroke and cancer, as well as your risk of developing dementia. There is no safe level of smoking.



Looking after your body

Being fit and healthy is important for your brain. You can maintain body health and reduce your risk of developing dementia by:

- increasing physical activity
- maintaining a healthy, balanced diet
- maintaining healthy sleep patterns
- checking your hearing and other senses
- protecting your head.

Increase physical activity

A lack of physical activity is one of the highest contributing risk factors to cognitive decline and dementia in later life.

Exercise helps keep the brain healthy and improves memory and thinking by:

- supporting blood flow and oxygen supply to the brain
- increasing new brain cells
- contributing to brain reserve
- protecting brain functioning in later life.

In Australia, 75% of people aged 65 and over are not sufficiently active and are surprised to learn how much physical activity is important for our health and wellbeing.

Being active also:

- reduces your risk of developing medical conditions that affect the heart and brain (e.g. high blood pressure, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and obesity)
- improves your sleep and mood
- helps to reduce your risk of falls
- keeps you social and engaged with other people.

How much physical activity should I do?

The current Australian Department of Health guidelines recommend:

- 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on at least five days a week
- muscle strengthening activities twice a week.

Moderate-intensity physical activities are those that cause your heart to beat faster and feel out of breath.

It is important to include a variety of activities that work different muscle groups and joints in the body. This will help you build your aerobic fitness, strength, balance and flexibility.

Ways to increase your physical activity

Getting started is often the hardest part. The key is to find activities that you enjoy and will be able to keep doing.

You might learn to dance, go swimming, play lawn bowls, or join a yoga class or walking group.

If you find exercise boring, look for activities to do with a friend. Or join a local community group.

You can also build activity into your everyday life, like walking to the shops instead of driving, or getting off the bus a few stops earlier and walk the rest of the way.

If you have a serious health condition or have been inactive for a long time, you should talk to your doctor about your plan to start physical activity.

Maintain a healthy, balanced diet

Your body and brain need a range of nutrients to function. A diet that is rich in vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids can help protect your brain by promoting important anti-inflammatory and antioxidant processes.

A healthy diet is also an important part of maintaining a healthy body weight. Overconsumption of some foods or being overweight increases blood pressure and the risk of diabetes, heart disease and stroke, which can increase the risk of developing dementia.

Evidence shows that healthy eating patterns are associated with better brain health.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines provide general tips for healthy eating.



Aim for variety

It is important to include a range of nutritious foods from each of the five food groups every day. These include:

- grain foods and cereals (preferably wholegrains), e.g. bread, pasta, rice, quinoa, polenta
- vegetables, legumes and beans, in a variety of colours
- fruit
- dairy products (preferably low-fat) or alternatives, such as soy-based products
- lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds.

Just make sure to keep portion sizes to the right amounts.

Monitor fat intake

Not all fats are bad. Some fats contain essential nutrients, such as olive oil, nuts, avocado and oily fish.

However, some fats (saturated and trans fats) are not healthy for the body and should be limited in your diet.

Foods high in unhealthy fats include:

- butter and cream
- full-fat dairy products
- fatty meats and processed meats
- palm oil and coconut oil
- biscuits, cakes and pastries
- deep-fried foods.

Watch your salt intake

Use salt sparingly when cooking or eating to help control your blood pressure. Avoid salty foods, such as frozen meals, fast food and processed or packaged foods.

Watch for hidden sugar

Be careful of foods with added sugar, such as desserts, soft drinks and foods marketed as low-fat. It is a good idea to check the sugar content on the label first.



Drink water

Increase your daily water intake by carrying a water bottle with you or pouring a glass of water with each meal.

Maintain healthy sleep patterns

Sleep plays a major role in brain health. It is critical for alertness, mood, daytime functioning and cognition.

Increasing evidence shows that sleep disturbance can increase the risk of developing depression, cognitive problems and dementia later in life.

Sleep disturbances include:

- shorter sleep periods
- frequent waking
- reduced sleep quality
- obstructive sleep apnoea.

In general, adults should aim for 7–8 hours sleep.

Various factors can affect the quality of our sleep. These include:

- medical conditions
- depression or anxiety
- substance and medication use
- daily sleep habits
- breathing problems.

However, with the right support and lifestyle changes, sleep disturbance can be managed.

Ways to improve your sleep patterns

Establish a sleep schedule

Get up at the same time every day to set your 'body clock'.

Create a relaxing bedtime routine

A good bedtime routine helps tell your brain and body that it is time for sleep.

Maintain a good sleep environment

Your bed should be comfortable and not too hot or cold. Remove distractions like a TV, radio or phone.

Be smart about napping

Try to keep them to 30 minutes in the early afternoon.

Keep physically active

Physical activity helps regulate our body clock, helps us fall asleep, increases deep sleep and reduces night waking.

Don't force sleep

If you can't fall sleep, move to another area of the house. Sit quietly with no TV, computer, lights or snacks, and return to bed when you feel tired again.

Don't use sleeping medications as a long-term solution

Sedative hypnotics and the benzodiazepine class of drugs should only be used for short-term assistance (i.e. no longer than two weeks).

Check your hearing and other senses

Our senses impact the way we respond to our environment and the people around us. More research is finding there may be a link between hearing loss and our risk of developing cognitive problems later in life.

People with mild hearing loss are twice more likely to develop dementia than those with normal hearing, while people with severe hearing loss are five times more likely.

Preventing or minimising hearing loss:

- avoid loud noise
- wear hearing protection
- quit smoking
- remove ear wax properly using a home irrigation kit
- have your hearing tested regularly.

If you start to notice problems with your hearing at any stage of life, you should talk to your doctor. Early diagnosis and intervention can help improve your quality of life and reduce your risk of dementia.

Some studies suggest an association between vision impairment and dementia in later life. Vision changes are common as we get older. Book regular eye examinations to check on the health of your eyes from mid-life onward.

Protect your head

Research has shown that moderate to severe head injuries, or repeated blows to the head, may increase the risk of developing dementia in later life.

The best approach is to protect our heads and avoid injury in the first place.

- Wear a helmet and appropriate safety gear during sporting or recreational activities, including riding bicycles, scooters or motorbikes.
- Wear a seatbelt when travelling in any motor vehicle.
- Obey road rules, including not driving after using drugs or alcohol.
- Take extra care on slippery surfaces.
- Minimise your risk of trips or falls inside and outside the home.





Looking after your mind

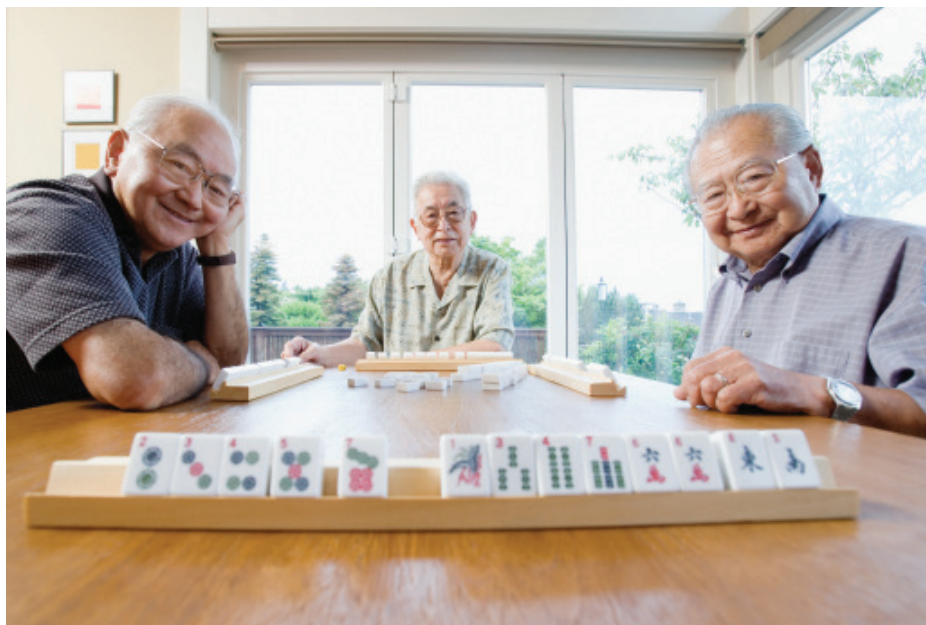
Keeping the brain stimulated and active is extremely important for our cognitive health.

Research has shown that the types of activities we do, how mentally and socially engaging they are, and how frequently we do them, can:

- Build brain reserve, so it can cope better and keep working properly if any brain cells are damaged or die.
- Build the brain's neuroplasticity, through the growth of new brain cells, improved connections between existing brain cells and improved support networks surrounding brain cells.

It's never too late to change our brains!

We used to think that 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'. However, research over the last 15 years has shown that the brain can adapt and change at all life stages, even in later life.



Ways to boost your mental activity

Exercise your brain

Mental stimulation and new learning are linked to a reduced risk of dementia. Some activities that exercise the brain are:

- reading
- crossword puzzles
- painting
- sewing
- woodwork
- cooking
- playing an instrument
- using technology.

It is important to vary the activities and do them frequently.

Participate in social activity

Social interaction helps to improve our wellbeing and reduce feelings of loneliness or depression. It may reduce our risk of cognitive decline.

It is important to find ways to be social:

- Say ‘hello’ or have a friendly chat with people you see through the day.
- Catch up with friends over the phone or in-person.
- Join a group activity through your local council, art gallery or museum.
- Join activities through organisations like Men’s Shed Association and Volunteering Australia.

Try something new!

Activities that are new, novel or challenging in some way require more mental effort and brain stimulation.



Manage your mood

Everyone experiences changes in their mood from time to time. But persistent or severe feelings of sadness, or a loss of enjoyment in your usual activities, can indicate depression.

Older people often present more physical and behavioural symptoms, such as:

- difficulty sleeping
- fatigue
- dizziness
- appetite changes
- cognitive problems (forgetfulness or poor concentration).

A history of depression is also an important risk factor for developing dementia in later life.

Around 75% of older people with depression will experience mild cognitive impairment, which affects their memory, speed of thinking, planning, problem-solving and decision-making skills.

If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, you should seek advice from your doctor about diagnosis and management.

The important thing to remember is that depression is treatable through psychological intervention, medication, or a combination of both.

Your mental wellbeing and brain health are important. Depression is a serious condition and there are medical specialists ready to help.

Creating and maintaining healthy habits

Small lifestyle changes to improve your heart, body and mind all add up to protect your brain health and reduce your risk of developing dementia.

It is never too late to make changes. The key is to decide what will work for you, then make a plan you can stick to.

Putting it all together

Set goals. Make changes that relate to a specific goal. You can have more than one goal at a time and change your goals along the way.

Start simple. Make gradual changes until the new behaviour becomes part of your routine. Trying to change too many things at once, is often unrealistic and unsustainable.

Build on what you know. Build new behaviours into your existing routine, rather than starting from scratch.

Enlist help. Share your goals with friends and family, to help keep you accountable and motivated.

Choose activities you enjoy. Choose an activity you like and are interested in to increase your motivation and make the goal more achievable.

Track your progress. Check in with your goals from time to time. Tracking your progress can help keep you motivated. Do not be discouraged if progress is slower than you would like.

Use rewards. Set small incentives along the way to keep you motivated.

Even with a diagnosis of dementia, looking after your heart, body and mind is essential.

A brain-healthy lifestyle can:

- help you manage the symptoms of dementia
- help you to live well with dementia for as long as possible
- slow disease progression.

What to do if you are worried

If you have concerns or questions about your brain health, there are many resources available to help.

Learn more about the signs and symptoms

Download or request a copy of the Dementia Australia Worried about your memory booklet.

Visit dementia.org.au/worried-about-your-memory

Talk to your doctor

Visit your doctor to talk about any difficulties with memory or thinking. Dementia can only be diagnosed through a comprehensive medical assessment.

Call the National Dementia Helpline

The National Dementia Helpline is a free and confidential service where you can chat with caring and experienced professionals about dementia and memory loss concerns, for yourself or others.

National Dementia Helpline: **1800 100 500**

Website: dementia.org.au

Useful websites

- dementia.org.au
- eatforhealth.gov.au
- alcohol.gov.au
- quitnow.gov.au
- lifeline.org.au
- heartfoundation.org.au
- beyondblue.org.au

For further information about brain health and lowering your risk of dementia, see dementia.org.au/risk-reduction

Brain Track

Check your **brain health**

Explore fun, free games and activities on the BrainTrack app.



Download now



National Dementia Helpline

1800 100 500



For language assistance
call **131 450**

Find us online
dementia.org.au



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