

Dementia Risk Reduction and Prevention

Dementia Australia's Approach



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Summary

- + Brain health and dementia risk reduction is fundamentally a shared responsibility across individuals, communities, governments and systems. No person is ever to blame for developing dementia.
- + Like cancer, some cases of dementia can be prevented or delayed, while others cannot.
- + In recent years we have learnt more about how to reduce dementia risk, but this knowledge was not well understood across the lifetimes of people who are currently living with dementia.
- + There is now more evidence about factors that may impact dementia risk and the more we know, the more we can do.
- + Some risk factors can't be changed, like age and genetics. These are called non-modifiable risk factors. Others, like education, hearing and vision health, blood pressure, smoking, physical activity and social connection, can be influenced and are called modifiable risk factors.
- + Individuals can stay socially connected, maintain healthy habits and manage medical conditions to protect their brain health but this is easier for some people than others.
- + Modifiable risk factors for dementia are shaped by social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions that people live, work and age in. They don't affect everyone equally and they are not simply personal choices.
- + When people have access to education, income, employment, housing, health care, social connection, and a safe environment, it is easier for people to reduce their dementia risk. We need policies that support everyone to maximise their good brain health.
- + Many of the modifiable risk factors that influence the risk of developing dementia are also important to maintaining function, quality of life and independence for people already living with mild cognitive impairment or dementia.
- + We must act to support brain health now. This includes educating and supporting people on how to incorporate brain healthy habits into their life whatever their age. As a society we must also make it easier for people to reduce risks that are beyond their control.

“Schools can provide healthy brain development from childhood. Employers can create healthy workplaces. Communities can reduce isolation and encourage active lifestyles. Healthcare professionals can identify risk factors earlier and provide personalised support. Researchers can continue to strengthen the evidence, whilst governments can provide coordinated leadership. Brain health should not belong to one profession or one sector. I believe it is the responsibility of everyone.”

William Yeates*

New evidence on dementia prevention and risk reduction

The causes of dementia are complex and risk factors affect different types of dementia differently. For example, at one end of the spectrum, HIV associated dementia can be prevented by avoiding infection with and/or treating HIV. At the other end of this spectrum are dementias, driven by specific genetic mutations that cannot currently be prevented although treatment research across many forms of genetic dementias is progressing. In between sit the more common forms of dementia (such as Alzheimer’s disease, vascular dementia, fronto-temporal dementia, and Lewy body dementia) which arise from a complex interplay of biology, genetics, familial history, risk exposure and environment, and therefore are, in varying degrees, partly preventable.

Knowledge about dementia risk reduction and prevention is continuing to evolve and become more widely available and understood. Dementia related changes in the brain typically start decades before symptoms appear. For most people living with dementia today, the current knowledge about dementia risk wasn’t available across their lifetime. Many people living with dementia also face stigma. Reducing stigma is important, as stigma can make it harder to get the support needed to reduce dementia risk, identify symptoms and get an accurate diagnosis. There is now more evidence about factors that may impact dementia risk and the more we know, the more we can do.

Dementia risk is not fixed¹. Some contributing factors can be modified across the life course. Dementia risk adds up over time, so action to modify risk factors is important at every stage of life. The 2017 *Lancet Commission on Dementia Prevention, Intervention and Care* identified nine modifiable risk factors dementia. The 2020 Lancet Commission expanded this to 12 modifiable risk factors^{2,3}. The 2024 Lancet Commission then estimated that nearly half of dementia cases globally, could be delayed or prevented by addressing 14 modifiable risk factors across the life course. These risk factors include low education in childhood; mid-life hypertension, hearing loss, smoking, obesity, depression, physical inactivity, diabetes, excessive alcohol consumption, air pollution, traumatic brain injury, high LDL cholesterol and later life social isolation, air pollution and vision loss⁴.

In 2026, the World Health Organisation released updated guidelines on reducing the risk of cognitive decline and dementia⁵. These guidelines provide recommendations on 19 risk factors to reduce dementia risk through healthy behaviours, managing health conditions and addressing environmental risk.

Risk factors and target areas for intervention

Behaviours	Health conditions and biological states		Environmental	Multi-domain
 Cognitive Inactivity	 Obesity	 Traumatic brain injury	 Air pollution	
 Physical Activity	 Dyslipidaemia	 Early/premature menopause		
 Harmful alcohol use	 Stroke	 Hypertension		
 Social isolation	 Poor sleep	 Vision impairment		
 Tobacco/smoking	 Diabetes	 Depression		
 Unhealthy diet	 Hearing loss	 HIV		

Importantly, the guidelines also emphasise the need for policies that help to improve brain health at a population level. This is because modifiable risk factors for dementia are shaped by social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions that people live, work and age in. They don't affect everyone equally and they are not simply personal choices. For example, obesity is not only influenced by a person's regular food and exercise habits. It is also influenced by whether healthy food is affordable and easy to access, which in turn is shaped by government policies and commercial practices of food companies.

Despite this research, the specific cause of every person's dementia is not always known. We cannot and must not hold individuals responsible for developing dementia. It is also important to acknowledge that complex biology means that reducing dementia risk does not guarantee that a person will not develop dementia.

In addition, brain health is equally important for people already living with mild cognitive impairment or dementia. Many of the same modifiable risk factors for developing dementia are also important to maintaining function, quality of life and independence for people already living with mild cognitive impairment or dementia. Whilst there is no cure for dementia, there is growing evidence that a focus on good brain health can allow people living with dementia to enjoy more years of life in good health.^{4,6}



“They don’t mean so much to me in terms of preventing dementia, because I am already living with dementia. For me, they are a way that I can gain control over my life. I want to be able to live a life that I can enjoy, one that has meaning and purpose. I find that actions to reduce a lot of the risk factors are exactly what I am doing now.”

William Yeates

Dementia Australia’s approach to prevention and risk reduction

Dementia Australia advocates for collective action on dementia prevention and risk reduction that:

- + Informs and empowers Australians to protect their brain health wherever possible, whilst also improving general understanding, inclusion and support for people living with dementia.
- + Makes dementia prevention and risk reduction a priority across the full dementia continuum, from before symptoms start to after diagnosis.
- + Improves the social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions and systems that people live, work and age in to reduce dementia risk.
- + Ensures equitable access to dementia diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, reablement and support.
- + Strengthens health and care workforce capability and post-diagnostic support.
- + Through the Dementia Australia Research Foundation, supports research to improve our knowledge about dementia risk and brain health.

*William is a Dementia Advocate, Board member of Alzheimer’s Disease International and a Peer Reviewer of Risk reduction of cognitive decline and dementia: WHO guidelines.

References

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