

Alzheimer's disease is one of the biggest concerns many of us have as we age. The thought of developing any form of dementia can be a scary prospect, especially if you've witnessed a loved one affected by the potentially debilitating disease. While you may have been told that all you can do is hope for the best and cross your fingers for a cure, the truth is much more encouraging. New research suggests that certain lifestyle habits might be able to offset the risks of developing Alzheimer's. Simply put, changing up a few of your daily habits could lessen your risk and be well worth the trouble.

It's true that Alzheimer's becomes more common with age, but it's not a normal part of getting older. Alzheimer's disease is a neurological disorder in which the death of brain cells causes memory loss and cognitive decline. Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia. It was not until 1901 that German psychiatrist Alois Alzheimer identified the first case of what became known as Alzheimer's, named after him, because of a fifty-year-old woman he called Auguste D. He followed her case until she died in 1906, when he first reported publicly on it. Age and genetics are the biggest risk factors however, researchers are constantly studying new habits that influence Alzheimer's risk. So, what does the research say?

While we already knew that a few healthy lifestyle habits can boost brain health, what's interesting about the most current research is its conclusion that these healthy lifestyle habits may very well decrease your risk of developing Alzheimer's as well. Specifically, research suggests that regular exercise, mental stimulation, stress management, social engagement, diet and sleep are the six pillars of Alzheimer's prevention.

According to the Alzheimer's Research & Prevention Foundation, regular physical activity can reduce your risk by up to 50%. Exercise directly benefits brain cells by increasing blood and oxygen flow in the

brain. Aim for at least 30 minutes 5 times per week. It is important to find a way of incorporating exercise that works for you. Include 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity, such as brisk walking, riding a bike, pushing a lawn mower or digging in the garden. Or alternatively 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity, such as going for a jog, swimming or joining a HIIT group ex class. Adding moderate levels of resistance training not only increases muscle mass, but also contribute to brain health. Add balance and coordination exercises such as yoga or tai chi to help you stay agile and avoid falls which often occur with age. It takes roughly 4 weeks for a new routine to become habitual. Do your best to commit for a month and soon workouts will feel natural, even something you may actually miss if you skip.

Use it or lose it! Keep your brain on its toes by including cognitively stimulating activities into your daily routines. Activities involving multi-tasking are beneficial. For example, tasks requiring communication, interaction, and organization offer the greatest stimulation and protection. Learn something new. Study a foreign language. Try learning a musical instrument. Practice memorization by playing simple memorization games. Start with something short, like a card match game. There are several apps available online. Then move towards crosswords, scrabble or sudoku. Brain teasers and strategy games provide a great mental workout and you may even have a little bit of fun along the way.

Experiencing some stress is part of everyday life, but when it persists over time, it can cause vascular changes and chemical imbalances that are damaging to the brain and other cells in your body. Chronic or persistent stress can take a heavy toll on the brain, leading to shrinkage in a key memory area, damaging nerve cell growth, and increasing the risk of Alzheimer's. By managing or lowering your stress, you can improve your brain health and reduce your risk of dementia. Get plenty of sleep and lots of Laughter. Reduce the harmful effects of stress on your mind and body through meditation,

deep breathing or massage. The key is to explore a variety of techniques and find those that work for you. Everyone needs to find a balance that limits stress and helps maintain optimal health.

Humans don't thrive in isolation and neither do their brains. In a study of 2,249 California women published in the July American Journal of Public Health, researchers reported that older women who maintained large social networks reduced their risk of dementia and delayed or prevented cognitive impairment. You don't need to be a social butterfly or the life of the party, but you do need to frequently connect face to face with people who care about you and make you feel valued. Whenever we have even the most basic social exchange, we have to think about how to respond, and that stimulates the brain. There are people who are outliers, who have two very close relationships and are fine cognitively. But people who have three or more relationships tend to do better. Get to know your neighbours, volunteer, join a social group, make a weekly date with friends, go out (the park, movies, museums, catch a game). Whatever the process is, social interaction protects the aging brain.

Current evidence suggests that heart healthy eating may also help protect the brain. When it comes to protecting your brain health, a hybrid of two eating styles may be best. Dubbed the "MIND" diet, short for Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay, this eating pattern goes big on natural plant-based foods while limiting red meat, saturated fat and sweets. At the recent Alzheimer Association's International Conference in the U.K, researchers revealed that following either a heart-healthy Mediterranean diet or its close cousin, the MIND diet can reduce future cognitive impairment by up to 35 percent. For a beginner's guide to the MIND diet search,

<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/mind-diet>

Of course, you get the biggest result if you follow the diet completely, but even little changes can have a significant impact.

There are no clear-cut answers yet particularly due to the need for more large-scale studies in diverse populations. Research is still evolving; however, evidence is strong that people can reduce their Alzheimer's risk by making key lifestyle changes. Becoming well-informed about the disease is an important long-term prevention strategy.

"If I only had a brain..."

L. Frank Baum, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

#LOVEYOURBRAIN

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