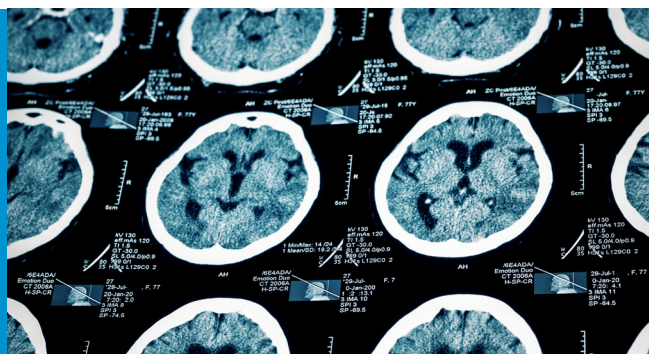


ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE PREVENTION

Productive Ageing Centre **National Seniors Australia**

As you get older, it's never too late to make lifestyle changes that can decrease your chance of developing Alzheimer's disease. This was the message from *Denise Wissmann (Senior Clinician, Alzheimers's Australia)* one of the key speakers at the Productive Ageing Forum.



Denise Wissman said that although the risk of dementia increases as you age and is more common in people who are over 65 years of age, it isn't all bad news. While the statistics can appear daunting, it's important to remember that although one in 10 people in Australia over 65 have dementia, this also means that nine in 10 people *don't* have dementia. Similarly, one in three people over 85 have dementia, but two in three *don't* have dementia. 'The risk of dementia increases with age but it's not a normal part of ageing', she said.

Alzheimer's is a type of dementia that affects a person's thinking and memory, their behaviour and eventually their ability to perform everyday tasks. The Australian Government has recognised dementia research as a priority area. Denise pointed out that a program developed by Alzheimer's Australia (*Your Brain Matters*) is based on scientific evidence that shows how health and lifestyle factors are related to your brain function and your risk of developing dementia. Strategies outlined in *Your Brain Matters* can help you to reduce the risk of developing dementia and to lead a healthier life as you age.

Information about the *Your Brain Matters* program is available at yourbrainmatters.org.au

Keeping your brain healthy

Changes in your brain can begin approximately 30 years before symptoms appear. Keeping your brain healthy is important because it may reduce your chance of developing dementia as you get older. Denise suggested a three-pronged approach to help keep your brain healthy and said that making changes does not have to be sophisticated or involve expensive programs.

Look after your heart

Many people do not know about the strong connection between heart health and brain health. Risk factors for heart and blood vessel disease (cardiovascular disease) can increase your chance of developing dementia. Checking your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, blood sugar levels and weight on a regular basis can help you to identify problems before they become serious. This means that you can get effective treatment to limit the damage to blood vessels (including those in the brain), which in turn can reduce the chance of damage to brain cell function.

Denise pointed out that having conditions such as Type 2 diabetes in middle age could make you twice as likely to develop dementia as you become older. Maintaining a healthy body weight is important because people with a high Body Mass Index (BMI) or a very low BMI have an increased risk of developing dementia.

Smoking is another risk factor that increases your chance of developing dementia by damaging your cardiovascular system. A scientific review found that 14% of Alzheimer's cases were attributed to smoking.



Look after your body

Exercise helps to maintain blood flow to all parts of the body (including the brain). Even moderate levels of physical activity can help to reduce the chances of developing dementia. Scientific studies have shown that fit, older adults have a larger hippocampus, the region in the brain that is involved in memory and language that shrinks with age. Denise said that one study showed people who regularly participated in an aerobic exercise program showed a significant increase in the size of the hippocampus in their brains. And of course, keeping fit also keeps your heart healthy.

Doing 150–300 minutes of exercise each week will 'keep us in pretty good shape', Denise said. A study suggested that a 25% reduction in physical inactivity prevented nearly one million cases of Alzheimer's disease worldwide.



Exercise reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, reduces high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, keeps weight gain in check and lowers the risk of diabetes, all of which may contribute to a decline in brain function.

Denise pointed out that there is no magic food that will reduce your chances of developing dementia. To have the best chance of maintaining a healthy body and brain, she recommended a diet that contains plenty of fruit and vegetables (two pieces of fruit and five serves of vegetables every day), legumes, nuts, low fat dairy and fish and lower quantities of meat and processed foods. Denise also recommended limiting the amount of alcohol that you drink. No more than two standard drinks per day and a couple of alcohol-free days every week is best for your body and your brain health.

Look after your brain

Research has shown that your brain continues to grow and builds new connections when you challenge it with new activities (a process known as neuroplasticity). Doing new and challenging activities builds up a 'reserve' in your brain, so if your brain cells are damaged or die you still have a chance of staying sharp as you age. 'It's important to challenge your brain with social activities that are complex, varied, done frequently and are fun', Denise said.

An easy way to keep your brain healthy is to stay socially engaged. Keeping in touch with friends, organising catch-ups that involve playing games or cards or taking the plunge and signing up for dance lessons or a short course all help to keep those brain connections firing. Learning new skills strengthens the connections between your brain cells and may reduce your risk of developing dementia. Don't be afraid to tackle the cryptic crossword or the Sudoku puzzle. Or for an interactive way of looking after your brain, download the BrainyApp, which helps you to rate and track the health of your brain and provides you with activities and ideas on how to improve your brain health.

Information on Alzheimer's and dementia is available at the National Dementia Helpline (1800 100 500) or at fightdementia.org.au

Information about the BrainyApp, an interactive way of looking after your brain health is available at brainyapp.com.au/aus

This fact sheet was developed using information provided by Denise Wissman (Senior Clinician, Alzheimer's Australia) in her presentation on Alzheimer's Disease Prevention at the Productive Ageing Forum 2014.