Researchers have found that people who carry out an active, healthy lifestyle have a lower risk of developing dementia. By keeping our brains as healthy as possible, we can reduce the risk of developing dementia.

The other good news is that people who have been diagnosed with dementia may be helped by following the same lifestyle strategies. Keeping active and engaged and getting good treatment for any other medical conditions that can damage our heart and brain, and that preventive strategies are important at any age. So there are many things you can do to live a brain healthy life to reduce your risk of dementia, because Your Brain Matters.

Your Brain Matters is an evidence-based program that promotes brain health and seeks to reduce the risk of dementia in the Australian population.

Your Brain Matters: A guide to healthy heart and minds, provides Australians with three key messages that encourage a holistic approach to reducing the risk of dementia:

• Keeping your brain active matters
• Being fit and healthy matters
• Looking after your heart matters

For more information on Your Brain Matters, and for tips on how to live a brain healthy life, visit yourbrainmatters.org.au

WHAT IS THE TAKE-HOME MESSAGE?

The research, thankfully, is reinforcing what we have learned before – if we look after our bodies, we are more likely to live longer with a healthier brain. At the same time, this will give us the best chance of having a healthy brain that is able to process information, think and relate to the world around us to the best possible extent.

Unfortunately, there are no guarantees. We do not know what causes Alzheimer’s disease and most other types of dementia, and we do not have control of risk factors such as our age or our genetics. But we do know that people who carry out an active, healthy lifestyle and look after their heart are less likely, on average, to develop the disease. By keeping our brains as healthy as possible, we can reduce the risk of developing dementia.

The other good news is that people who have been diagnosed with dementia may be helped by following the same lifestyle strategies. Keeping active and engaged and getting good treatment for any other medical conditions may help slow the decline in cognitive functions.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT MAINTAINING OUR BRAIN HEALTH?

Alzheimer’s Australia examined scientific research from around the world to find the latest evidence on prevention strategies for dementia. The results of this review shows that a range of strategies have an impact on both physical and brain health. By adopting a healthy lifestyle, we are more likely to live longer with a healthier body. At the same time, this will give us the best chance of having a healthy brain that is able to process information, think and relate to the world around us to the best possible extent.

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When it comes to brain health, there isn’t a silver bullet. Here is a summary of the evidence to support health and lifestyle strategies for reducing the risk of dementia.

### MENTAL ACTIVITY

Higher levels of mental activity throughout life are associated with a richer brain function and reduced risk of cognitive decline and dementia.

Research suggests that mental complexity and new learning assist with the maintenance and regeneration of brain cells. Complex mental activity across the lifespan contributes to something called ‘brain reserve’, that allows our brains to continue working into old age.

Importantly for older or retired people, increased complex mental activity (for example learning a new language) is associated with a lower dementia risk, so it’s never too late to take on new challenges in life.

### SOCIAL ACTIVITY

Engagement in social activity is also associated with reduced risk of cognitive decline and dementia. Social engagement has been found to have benefits for other health factors related to cognitive functioning, such as vascular conditions and depression. Social activity is mentally stimulating and may contribute to building brain reserve which then contributes to reducing the risk of dementia.

Research suggests that social activities that also involve mental stimulation and physical activity (for example team sports) can provide even greater benefit.

### PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

There is now, more than ever, strong evidence that regular physical activity leads to an increase in brain function and reduced risk of cognitive decline and dementia. Even simple exercise like walking has been shown to be beneficial.

Physical activity increases blood flow to the brain, stimulates the growth of brain cells and connections between them, is associated with larger brain volume, and reduces the risk of cardiovascular conditions associated with increased risk and severity of cognitive decline and dementia.

Diet

More research is needed to understand if there are specific foods that may be able to reduce the risk of dementia. However, the evidence suggests that overall, a healthy, balanced diet in maintaining brain health and functionality.

Several studies have found that a high intake of saturated fats, such as those found in meat and take away foods, and transmaturated fats, such as those such as those that may be found in pies and cakes, are associated with an increased risk of dementia. Whereas a high intake of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, such as those found in fish and olive oil, is associated with a reduced risk of dementia. Foods that are high in anti-oxidants such as tomatoes, cranberries and oranges also seem to be good for brain health.

The omega 3 fatty acids contained in fish oils may reduce inflammation in the brain and promote the growth of new neurons. Some studies have shown an association between higher fish consumption and lower dementia risk.

Diets which include a higher intake of fruits, vegetables, fish, nuts and seeds, and a lower intake of meats and foods that are high in saturated fats including high fat dairy products, processed food and sweets are associated with lower risk of cognitive decline and dementia.

### ALCOHOL

Moderate alcohol consumption is associated with better thinking abilities and reduced risk of dementia.

The benefits of moderate alcohol consumption include its antioxidant properties, reducing inflammation, increasing good cholesterol and reducing blood flow, all of which have positive effects on brain health. But heavy alcohol use can lead to brain damage and this may increase your risk of dementia.

The recommended guidelines of no more than two standard drinks per day should be followed. This being said, the evidence does not suggest that those who currently abstain should start to drink alcohol.

### BODY WEIGHT

Maintaining a healthy body weight is good for the heart and is associated with a better brain function and reduced dementia risk. Being obese in mid-life may increase the risk of developing dementia many years later. Obesity is associated with increased risk for high blood pressure, diabetes and vascular disease, all of which affect brain health and increase the risk of dementia.

Smoking

Smoking may affect dementia risk through its negative effects on the cardiovascular system, as well as damaging brain cells and causing inflammation in the brain.

Former smokers do not appear to be at an increased risk compared to those that have never smoked, which suggests that quitting smoking may be beneficial for reducing dementia risk.

### BLOOD PRESSURE

Uncontrolled high blood pressure, specifically in mid-life, has been associated with an increased risk of Alzheimer’s disease. Promisingly, treatment of high blood pressure in mid-life has been found to reduce dementia risk. One factor to point out is that high blood pressure treatment is associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease. The key to this risk factor is ensuring that high blood pressure is appropriately managed during midlife.

### CHOLESTEROL

Uncontrolled high cholesterol specifically at mid-life is associated with an increased risk of developing dementia, especially Alzheimer’s disease. Treatment of high cholesterol has been associated with reduced risk of dementia in some studies. Uncontrolled high-mid-life cholesterol levels may elevate the toxic protein accumulations of Alzheimer’s disease and damage brain blood vessels, both of which can contribute to cognitive impairment.

### DIABETES

Type 2 diabetes and pre-diabetes symptoms appear to be risk factors for cognitive impairment and dementia. The mechanisms underlying the association between diabetes and dementia risk are unclear, and further research is needed in this area.

Few studies have examined the effect of treatment of diabetes on dementia risk and the results are mixed. Prevention of diabetes, through early screening for glucose tolerance and insulin resistance and lifestyle modifications for those at risk, could reduce the incidence of mild cognitive impairment and dementia.

### WHAT ELSE?

People with a history of depression or depressive symptoms appear to have, on average, a higher risk of developing dementia. Evidence suggests that treatment with antidepressants improves brain function in people with depression, but it is unknown if treatment is likely to reduce the risk of developing dementia. Ongoing research in this area is needed.

Serious head injury, with loss of consciousness, is also associated with an increased risk of dementia.

Several mechanisms may explain this association: damage to the blood brain barrier; increased oxidative stress; neuronal loss; and increased enzyme activity leading to increased dementia pathology have all been implicated. Taking preventative approaches, which may include falls prevention and wearing protective head gear to avoid serious head injury, is important.