

Preventing or delaying dementia

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→ Who hasn't seen their parents or grandparents forget their grandchild's name at some point?

Not to worry: after all, becoming a little bit more forgetful is just part and parcel of growing older. But when someone's ability to remember, recognize, think and solve problems dwindles considerably within a short space of time, posing a real obstacle to day-to-day life, it's no longer simple forgetfulness, but rather about an incurable condition: dementia.

Anyone can come down with dementia, as the cases of more and more celebrities remind us. "In Germany alone, 1.3 million people currently suffer from the condition. The probability that any one of us could develop Alzheimer's or any other form of dementia by the time we're 90 is around one in three," explains Allianz expert Michaela Grimm.



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Ever since Alois Alzheimer first described the disease named after him in 1906, there has been considerable progress in research into causes and effects. However it still has not been possible to find long-term relief from dementia, much less a cure.

→ But there are ways of avoiding the risks connected with dementia. Researchers have already found many ways to protect the brain from numerous hazards. And in the years to come we will be able to expect more findings. If you want to stay physically and mentally fit in the future, here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- **Stay active.** Passive lifestyles, i.e. lifestyles that do not involve much physical activity or exercise, favor the development of dementia. In fact, staying active for as long as possible helps to prevent a whole number of diseases. Scientists have proven that ample exercise in old age can reduce the risk of a decline in mental performance by around 50 percent.
- **Our brains need work.** You are more likely to stay mentally active if you like to read, write, do crosswords, play a musical instrument or even if you like to talk a lot. The harder your brain has to work, the more active it stays in old age. Playing the piano, for example, works wonders for the memory because the fine motor skills you need to play improve the circulation to the brain at the same time. You can achieve the same effect by using two tennis balls that you move across your hands using your fingers. Scientific studies show that "brain work" reduces the risk of dementia.

- **Mental fitness.** If you stop constantly challenging your brain, the network of connections between the brain cells starts to thin out. There are innumerable ways of actively training your brain. Why not try reading a few pages of your daily newspaper upside down. Or try to think of as many words as you can that contain “water” or “sun”. You can also find plenty of books on training the brain in your local book store.
- **Eat right.** A healthy diet, i.e. one that is rich in fruit and vegetables containing vitamins C and E, also lowers the risk of developing dementia. You should also make sure that fish is on your menu at least once a month. An excessively fatty, calorie-rich diet, on the other hand, can cause you to carry extra weight, disturbing the blood flow to the brain and, as a result, exposing you to a higher risk of dementia.
- **Bottoms up – a little less.** Excessive alcohol consumption and smoking are “poison” to the human body. Both cause brain cells to die off, which may result in dementia.
- **A healthy heart.** Cardiovascular conditions, such as high blood pressure, require systematic treatment. This can reduce any disruption to the blood flow in the brain and, as a result, the risk of dementia.
- **Diabetes and stress – a problem here as well.** Diabetes mellitus and lipometabolic disorders, as well as extreme stress over prolonged periods, are risk factors for heart attacks and strokes. These are indirectly linked to a higher risk of dementia in old age.
- **Protect your ears.** There is evidence suggesting that increasing loss of hearing can favor the development of dementia in older people. With this in mind, you should make sure that you protect your ears from unhealthy influences as well.
- **Happy thoughts.** Depression is also one of the risk factors for dementia. Especially among younger people, depression can cause symptoms similar to those caused by dementia. Although a rare occurrence, people can be diagnosed with an early form of dementia from the age of only 30 if their depression is not treated.
- **The effects of pollution.** There is an increasing body of data to suggest that people who, for example, regularly come into contact with pesticides (like agricultural workers or winegrowers), poisonous heavy metals or dye solvents are at an increased risk of dementia. Try to protect yourself from harmful environmental influences as much as you can
- **Less a question of genes than a question of gender.** Dementia can rarely be attributed to hereditary causes. One striking fact, however, is that women are more likely to suffer from the disease than men are. 70% of those aged between 65 and 90 suffering from dementia are female, so women should take particular care.



Research is currently focused on the question of how to improve assistance and care for patients with dementia. It isn't just about how to adapt normal care procedures to the needs of people with this condition, which, among other things, helps to reduce the use and costs of psychopharmaceuticals.

Above all else the issue is how to preserve the independence of dementia sufferers for as long as possible. Part of this means supporting care-giving relatives by connecting them better to medical care facilities and other existing care providing resources. Expanding daytime care services and alternative care and living forms like assisted living centers for people with dementia are also gaining more and more importance.

This can help alleviate the symptoms and slow down the progress of the illness. However, to date there is still no way to stop dementia. Nonetheless, there are signs of hope, as researchers are working on several ways to prevent the failure of nerve cells.

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