

# A Weekly To-Do List to Help Delay or Prevent Dementia

The prospect of losing the ability to think, reason and remember people, places and events strikes fear into the hearts of everyone as they age, and rightly so. Dementia is on the rise; every seven seconds a person's future is forever altered by the diagnosis. In the U.S., an estimated 4.5 million Americans live with Alzheimer's disease (AD), the most common form of dementia. Experts expect that number to quadruple by 2050, when the last baby boomers turn 90.

**Genetics Doesn't Dictate Fate.** A growing sense of helplessness has emerged as the evidence mounts that AD risk is influenced by your genes. The most recent

to prevent heart disease and stroke. Here is *EN's* advice for staving off dementia:

**Protect Heart and Head.** Vascular dementia results from small strokes (transient ischemic attacks or TIAs) that alter blood supply to the brain, crippling cognitive ability. To reduce the risk of TIAs, control blood pressure and blood cholesterol with a healthy lifestyle and medication as needed:

- Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables to boost your potassium intake.
- Limit processed foods to reduce sodium intake.
- Limit saturated and trans fats by eating less meat and more fish, whole grains, nuts, seeds and low-fat dairy.

**Mind Your B's.** People with AD tend to have higher blood levels of homocysteine, a rogue amino acid that increases the risk of dementia. Getting enough of the B vitamins B6, B12 and folic acid (folate) keeps homocysteine in check:

- Eat fortified cereals, nuts, legumes, lean meats, seafood and eggs.
- Take a daily multivitamin supplement that provides at least 100% of vitamins B6, B12 and folic acid.

**Feed Your Head.** Fruits, vegetables and whole grains contain nutrients that stave off brain cell damage:

- Include at least three servings of whole grains plus five to nine of fruits and vegetables every day as part of a diet low in saturated and trans fats.

**Fish for Omega-3s.** One fish meal a week was enough to reduce the risk of AD in the Chicago Health and Aging Project, which followed more than 800 adults for about four years; consuming even more omega-3s from foods further reduced risk.

- Eat fish instead of meat and poultry at least twice weekly.

- Include plant foods rich in omega-3s, such as walnuts, flaxseed, soy and canola oil, in your diet regularly.

**Move It, Don't Lose It.** A recent study that followed more than 1,700 healthy people 65 and older for six years found that those who exercised a minimum of 15 minutes at least three times weekly had a 32% lower risk of developing dementia than those who were less active.

- Participate in moderate activity for at least 15 minutes three times a week (ideally, for 30 minutes on most days for cardiovascular and other benefits).

**Break a Cognitive Sweat.** Exercise your brain to ward off decline; people who do mental gymnastics run a lower risk of AD.

- Read the morning newspaper.
- Visit a museum.
- Take dancing lessons.
- Solve puzzles. Try the challenge of *The New York Times* crosswords. (*Tip:* Start with Monday's puzzle; they get harder as the week goes on.)

**Stay Engaged.** Older adults with a rich network of friends and who participate in social activities tend to preserve brain function better than those who don't socialize.

- Visit with family and friends.
- Schedule social events regularly.
- Talk to new people.

**Control Diabetes.** You're more at risk for dementia if you have diabetes, especially if blood glucose levels are not in control.

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Limit refined grains; emphasize whole grains, fruits and vegetables.
- Be active every day. If you can't get outside, walk up and down stairs.
- Take prescribed medication regularly.

—Elizabeth M. Ward, M.S., R.D.

## Dodging Dementia

Certain chronic conditions like Alzheimer's disease are considered irreversible. But about 20% of dementias are reversible, at least partially. It's important to have your symptoms evaluated thoroughly and treat correctable conditions, including the following:

- Severe depression
- Malnutrition, e.g., B vitamin deficiencies
- Chronic drug abuse
- Hypothyroidism (low thyroid levels)
- Hypoglycemia (low blood glucose)
- Dehydration

evidence of this is from researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, who looked at the genes of 100 healthy 90-year-olds living independently and found they all had genetic profiles that protected against AD.

But is senility an inevitable result of aging for everyone else? Not at all. Heredity accounts for relatively few cases of dementia, even AD. Moreover, there's plenty you can do to help maintain your brain for years to come, which conveniently includes the same things you do

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