

Brain Health as You Age:



What You Should Know

You Can Make a Difference! We can't control some risk factors for Alzheimer's disease such as age and genetic profile. But scientists are studying a number of other factors that could make a difference. Research suggests that certain lifestyle factors, such as a nutritious diet, exercise, social engagement, and mentally stimulating pursuits, might help to reduce the risk of cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease. Scientists are investigating associations between cognitive decline and heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. Understanding these relationships and testing them in clinical trials will help us understand whether reducing risk factors for these diseases may help with Alzheimer's as well. (Source: www.nia.nih.gov)

Cognitive Activity

Staying mentally active encourages blood flow to the brain and promotes new pathways and brain connections. Mentally stimulating activities may possibly maintain or even improve cognition.

- ✓ Read books, play strategic games, learn new skills or hobbies and keep learning.
- ✓ Engage in formal education; take classes at adult education centers, community colleges and universities.

Exercise and Physical Health

Research has shown that exercise can stimulate the human brain's ability to maintain old network connections and make new ones that are vital to healthy cognition. Evidence also suggests that exercise benefits brain cells by increasing blood and oxygen flow to the brain. Some researchers report that physical inactivity is the #1 modifiable risk factor for cognitive impairment. According to the Mayo Clinic, "Sitting is the new Smoking."

- ✓ Check with your doctor before beginning any new exercise program.

- ✓ Perform regular exercise to increase blood flow.
- ✓ Monitor blood pressure, blood sugar, weight and cholesterol.
- ✓ Gradually increase your level of activity and incorporate activities you enjoy.
- ✓ Consider activities that are also mentally and socially engaging. Ask friends to join you for a dance class or an exercise group.
- ✓ Get adequate sleep, stop smoking, avoid excessive alcohol use, manage stress, avoid head injury and visit your doctor regularly.

Diet and Nutrition

A diet that includes lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and is low in fat and added sugar can reduce the risk of many chronic diseases, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Some studies suggest that a diet rich in vegetables, especially leafy greens and cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli is associated with a reduced rate of cognitive decline (nia.nih.gov). Research points to the benefits of two diets in particular: the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet and the Mediterranean diet.

- ✓ What is good for the heart is good for the brain. Studies show that adopting a heart-healthy diet, even later in life, may have benefits for your brain and overall health.
- ✓ **EAT:** vegetables ♥ fruits ♥ nuts, beans and whole grains ♥ lean meats, fish and poultry ♥ vegetable oils
- ✓ **AVOID:** saturated/trans fats • processed foods • solid fat, sugar and salt • deep-fried foods • unhealthy fast foods
- ✓ Consult with your doctor about dietary supplements and vitamins.

Social Engagement

Staying cognitively active throughout life—via social engagement or intellectual stimulation—is associated with a lower risk of Alzheimer’s disease (nia.nih.gov). Research indicates that connecting with others socially benefits overall health and may delay the onset of dementia. Those who engage with others tend to have reduced rates of disability. When people feel good about their social networks, they tend to make healthier choices.

- ✓ Find an activity or connection that gives your life a sense of meaning.
- ✓ When you can, choose social activities that have a cognitive or physical component.
- ✓ Visit with family or friends; engage with new friends.
- ✓ Stay involved in the community or join a group or club; volunteer outside the home.

You Can Make a Difference!

Don’t Wait, Start Today!

Resources:

www.nia.nih.gov/healthyaging
www.clinicaltrials.gov
www.alz.org

