

Alzheimer's  
Society

Leading the  
fight against  
dementia

# Be head strong

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A guide to help you reduce your  
risk of developing dementia

# What is dementia?

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The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, but other conditions such as stroke can cause another type of dementia called vascular dementia.

## What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a physical disease affecting the brain. During the course of the disease 'plaques' and 'tangles' develop in the structure of the brain, leading to the death of the brain cells. As the damage to the brain progresses patients will need more and more support from those who care for them.

## What is vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia is the second most common form of dementia. The brain needs a good supply of blood to function properly. If the network of blood vessels becomes damaged, blood cannot reach the brain cells and they will eventually die. This can lead to the onset of vascular dementia.

**Dementia is not a natural part of ageing. It's caused by diseases of the brain and robs people of their lives.**

# Am I at risk?

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Risk is a person's chance of getting dementia over a certain period of time. A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of developing dementia.

More than 25% of all those who have dementia in the UK have vascular dementia or mixed dementia (vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease). Research indicates that certain medical conditions such as Type II diabetes, high blood pressure and an unhealthy lifestyle are all contributory factors to developing these forms of dementia.

We do not fully understand the role of genetics in the development of dementia, but some of the diseases that cause dementia do have a hereditary component. These include early onset dementia (before the age of 65), and some diseases that can cause dementia, such as Huntington's and Niemann-Pick Type C. But in most cases, the effect of inheritance seems to be small – if your parent has dementia, your own chances of developing it are only a little higher than if there were no dementia in your family.

**1 in 3 people over 65  
will die with dementia.**

# Reducing my risk

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You cannot eliminate all risk factors for dementia. The most significant – age – is unavoidable. But there are some risk factors we can do something about.

Living a healthy lifestyle can reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke. It may also reduce your risk of developing dementia. By keeping your body healthy – especially your heart – you can help to keep your brain healthy too.

**Eat healthily** – eat lots of fruit and vegetables and try to limit the number of high-fat, sugary and salty foods you eat.

**Get active** – try to exercise for 30 minutes at least five times a week.

**Watch your blood pressure and cholesterol** – ask your GP to check your blood pressure and cholesterol regularly. A healthy diet and regular exercise can help keep you within healthy limits.

**Keep a healthy weight** – nearly a quarter of all adults in the UK are obese. Obesity is linked to the development of dementia so it's important to keep in shape.

Smoking has an extremely harmful effect on the heart, lungs and blood system (including the blood system in the brain).

# Get active

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Thirty minutes of exercise five or more times a week may sound a lot but it doesn't have to be strenuous. Start with five minutes each time, and add two minutes each day.

## Simple ways to start exercising

- Walk in your lunch hour with colleagues instead of staying in the office.
- Plan activities with friends instead of just meeting for a chat or a drink.
- Get off your train or bus a stop early and walk the rest of the way.

- Join a class such as yoga or badminton.
- Swim once a week.

## Exercise for stamina, strength and flexibility

**Stamina** – walking, cycling, tennis, and dancing.

**Strength** – walking uphill, carrying shopping, climbing stairs, gardening and housework.

**Flexibility** – swimming, yoga, dancing, Pilates, T'ai Chi and gardening.

You should be active for 30 minutes five or more times a week – you could keep an exercise record to see how you're progressing.

# Eat healthily

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The key to a healthy diet is balance. No food is bad for you in itself, but some food may be unhealthy in excess. A diet without a little of the enjoyable foods you love would be very dull – and hard to stick to – but you should try to limit the amount of high fat, sugary or salty food you eat.

A Mediterranean diet with lots of fruits, vegetables, cereals, some fish, moderate amounts of alcohol, and little dairy and meat is recommended, as it is low in fat, sugar and processed food, and high in protein, fibre and anti-oxidants.

Increasing the amount of fruit and vegetables you eat will help reduce your risk of dementia. The anti-oxidants and phytochemicals they contain have been linked to the prevention of dementia, and are important in promoting good health generally.

**Choose different coloured  
fruit and vegetables each day.  
They're good for your heart  
and your brain too.**

# Top diet tips

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## 1 Eat more fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables can lower the risk of developing dementia. Choose different coloured fruit and vegetables and eat a wide variety each day for maximum benefit.

## 2 Eat less fat

Too much saturated fat can cause narrowing of the arteries, making heart attack or stroke more likely, in turn increasing the risk of vascular dementia. Saturated fat is found mainly in meat and dairy products, and in some processed foods.

## 3 Eat less salt

Salt can increase blood pressure and this increases the risk of developing dementia. Cutting down on salt can be difficult since 75 % of the salt we eat is already in the food we buy. Read the labels – less than 0.3g salt per 100g is low salt, more than 1.5g per 100g is high salt.

## 4 Drink in moderation

Some research has suggested that moderate amounts of red wine, which contains anti-oxidants, might help to protect the brain against dementia and keep the heart and blood system healthy.

Many of us are eating  
more than our recommended  
6g of salt a day.

# Use your brain

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Exercising and challenging your brain – by learning new skills, doing puzzles such as crosswords, and even learning a new language – can be fun. Unfortunately Alzheimer's Society research has shown that playing brain training games doesn't improve your overall mental fitness.

More research is needed to understand whether these sorts of activities can reduce your risk of dementia, but if you enjoy doing them then carry on.

Reading, evening classes, five-a-side football, Fair Isle knitting or voluntary work – whatever your interest, give it a try. You may find you meet some interesting new people along the way.

By making small changes to the way we live, we can reduce the overall risk of dementia as we get older.



Leading the fight  
against dementia

**Alzheimer's  
Society**

**Alzheimer's Society is the UK's leading support services and research charity for people with dementia and those who care for them.**

Alzheimer's Society provides information and support for people with all forms of dementia and those who care for them. It runs quality services, funds research, advises professionals and campaigns for improved health and social care and greater public understanding and awareness of dementia.

[alzheimers.org.uk](https://alzheimers.org.uk)

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