



# Dementia

Helping your  
brain to stay  
healthy



Helping you prevent  
diabetes  
heart disease  
kidney disease  
stroke & dementia

[www.nhs.uk/nhshealthcheck](http://www.nhs.uk/nhshealthcheck)

Produced by  
Public Health England

Alzheimer's Society  
Leading the  
fight against  
dementia

# Why have we written this leaflet?

The NHS wants to help keep people healthy. This could lower their chances of getting dementia – symptoms caused by serious brain disease.

Many people don't know that what they do every day can help keep a healthy brain. The good news is that it's never too late to act.

## What is dementia?

Dementia affects the way the brain normally works. This makes it difficult to do every-day activities. For example, people who have dementia often forget things or get confused.

There are different types of dementia. All of them interfere with daily life. And all of them get worse over time. Alzheimer's disease is one type of dementia.

Dementia affects about 850,000 people in the UK. This is as much as the entire population of Liverpool and Manchester.

Most older people do not get dementia. But those people who are affected are usually over 65. It cannot be cured but you can reduce your chances of getting dementia. Even if someone has dementia, they can take action to lessen the symptoms.

## Myths about dementia

### Myth 1: Dementia is inevitable. If you are going to get it there is nothing you can do.

Fact: Dementia is not inevitable. You can act every day to reduce your chances of getting dementia. Some of the things you can do are described later.

### Myth 2: Dementia is inherited from your parents.

Fact: Dementia is only inherited in a very small number of cases. Most dementia is not inherited.

### Myth 3: Alzheimer's and dementia are the same thing

Fact: Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. About two out of every three people with dementia have Alzheimer's.

### Myth 4: You don't need to do physical exercises as long as you do crosswords and Sudoku

Fact: It is always good to stimulate your mind and your memory. But we know that a healthy lifestyle is the best way to reduce your chance of getting dementia.

## The symptoms of dementia

- **Forgetfulness.** For example, trouble remembering what has happened recently or recognising familiar people and places.
- **Problems planning and doing tasks** you used to do easily. For example, dealing with money, following a cooking recipe or writing a letter.
- **Feeling confused** even in a familiar place.
- Finding it hard to **follow conversations** and losing the thread of what you were saying.

- **Trouble controlling your mood or behaviour.** For example, feeling depressed, agitated or irritable.

If you have these symptoms it may not mean that you have dementia. Other things can cause the same symptoms. Whatever the cause, it is best to speak to a professional. Make an appointment with your doctor or contact the Alzheimer's Society for more information (contact details at the end of this leaflet).

## Reducing your risk of dementia

Your memory and your ability to think and communicate all depend on your brain. By keeping a healthy brain you can reduce your chance of getting dementia.

The recommendations below will help to keep your brain active and healthy.

### Be physically active

Being physically active will help reduce your risk of dementia. It will improve how well you feel. And it will help to keep your heart, bones and muscles healthy. Aim to be active every day for 10 minutes or more. Try not to sit for long periods.

### Look for small ways to add more movement to your daily life

Get off the bus one stop early and walk. Walk short distances rather than take the car. Walk your dog for longer. Take the stairs not the lift. Use your bike to get around.

### If you have mobility problems

Walk short distances and build up to longer ones. Use a suitable bike. Do chair exercises. Go swimming. Do some housework. Work in your garden. Play with your grandchildren.

## Eat healthily and maintain a healthy weight

A healthy diet will help reduce some forms of dementia. Unhealthy eating and being overweight can affect the blood supply to your brain. And this can affect your thinking.

Aim to eat less sugar and salt. The fat in sausages and processed meats, butter and cakes can increase the risk of heart disease and other health problems linked to dementia. Try to eat less of these foods, less fried food and less sugary sweets and drinks. And eat more oily fish like salmon and sardines and more fruit and vegetables.

## Don't drink too much alcohol

There are no safe levels for drinking alcohol. Drinking alcohol can harm your brain. Drinking at high levels over time can also cause alcohol-related brain damage.

If you choose to drink:

- Men and women are advised not to regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week (6 pints of beer or glasses of wine).
- Spread your drinking over three days or more if you drink as much as 14 units a week.

The more you drink above these amounts, the more chance you have of harming your brain.

## Give up smoking

Smoking almost doubles your chance of getting dementia. Smoking is very harmful to the heart, lungs and circulation of your blood. This can affect the blood vessels in the brain. By giving up smoking you can reduce the risk of dementia.

It's never too late to give up smoking. People who quit aged 60 can add three years to their life. There are trained advisors who can provide information and medication to help you to stop smoking. The NHS Smokefree Helpline is free to call on 0300 123 1044 or talk to your GP or pharmacist for advice. Ask about e-cigarettes as a way to help you give up.

## Connect with people around you

Staying mentally and socially active will improve your personal wellbeing. It could also help to improve your chances of delaying or avoiding dementia.

Keeping mentally active by learning new skills or joining clubs can also be a good way to connect with other people and improve mental wellbeing. You could play Scrabble, cards or bingo, do puzzles, help your grandchildren with their homework, join a quiz or darts team.

## Managing your health

Some people may already have a health condition such as high blood pressure or diabetes. To reduce your chance of developing dementia it is really important to manage your health by taking the medicines you've been prescribed.

## Find out more

### Alzheimer's Society

Phone: 0300 222 11 22

Email (helpline):

[helpline@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:helpline@alzheimers.org.uk)

Website: [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

You can also find out more about reducing the risk of dementia from **Alzheimer's Research UK** in the 'Reducing your risk of dementia' booklet at: [www.alzheimersresearchuk.org](http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org)

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