

Q&A: Four ways to reduce your risk of dementia

July 20 2022, by Cynthia Weiss



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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I am in my mid-40s and have two young

children. My mother developed memory issues in her early 60s, and it has progressively worsened. Her sisters also have related issues. How can I reduce my risk—and my children's risk—for dementia? Are there certain foods, supplements or activities that we should incorporate into our lives to lower the chances for memory loss?

ANSWER: Dementia describes symptoms that affect a person's memory, thinking and social abilities to the point that it's difficult to perform normal daily activities. Dementia is caused by [brain disease](#). Alzheimer's disease is the most common and the one best known to the public. Diseases that affect the [blood vessels](#)—the same diseases that cause heart attacks and stroke—are the second most common cause of dementia.

Having a family history of dementia increases your risk of developing the condition. However, many people with a family history never develop symptoms. And those who don't have a [family history](#) also may experience memory issues as they age.

Consider these four tips to reduce your overall risk of memory challenges.

1. Participate in activities that stimulate the brain

Consider puzzles and computer games. But make it a habit over your lifetime, as research suggests that the value of cognitively stimulating activities builds up over a lifetime. That means that acquiring a good education; working in a job that is mentally stimulating; and taking part in pastimes, hobbies and [social activities](#) that require mental focus are important for reducing your risk of developing dementia.

2. Focus on education and learn new skills

Studies have shown that the more years of education a person has, the lower the dementia risk. This appears to be because people who spend more time involved in learning tend to develop more robust networks of nerve cells and connections between those nerve cells within their brains. Those networks are better equipped to handle the cell damage that can happen due to brain disorders that may lead to dementia.

3. Maintain a healthy lifestyle

As with other [health issues](#), a [healthy lifestyle](#) is equally important for maintaining brain health. Eating well, maintaining a healthy weight, participating in regular exercise, and avoiding conditions that increase the risk for heart attacks and strokes also can reduce your risk of dementia. Taking time to effectively manage your cholesterol and [blood pressure](#), not smoking, and limiting alcohol consumption also have been shown to improve cognitive health later in life. And that's because these measures affect the health of the blood vessels in your brain, neck and heart. It's also important to get a good night's sleep and to treat sleep disorders such as sleep apnea. Supplements to sleep should not be necessary if you eat a balanced diet.

4. Maintain social interaction

Research shows that [social interaction](#) at any age will have positive cognitive benefits. Regularly interacting with others, including family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and community members, can lift your mood, improve your outlook and use your brain. These regular interactions positively affect your cognitive abilities, and this has been shown to ease symptoms of dementia.

As to your children specifically, good habits start early. The earlier you start them on practicing healthy habits, the more likely they are to sustain them. This will benefit them in later years. Make sure they also

are living as healthy a lifestyle as possible. If their brain and heart blood vessels stay in good condition throughout young adulthood and midlife, your children are more likely to be able to remain healthy as they age.

If the health of those blood vessels deteriorates when people are younger, it's difficult to mend the damage later. And damage to the brain's blood vessels can be a factor in dementia.

This is not to say that incorporating healthy choices into your lifestyle if you are older won't make any difference. These choices can still positively affect your cognitive and physical health.

If you are concerned that you may be experiencing memory issues earlier than your mother, despite changing your lifestyle, reach out to your primary care provider or a neurologist for additional guidance.

Information provided by Dr. Gregory Day, Neurology, Mayo Clinic, Jacksonville, Florida.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

Citation: Q&A: Four ways to reduce your risk of dementia (2022, July 20) retrieved 19 November 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-07-qa-ways-dementia.html>

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