5 Common Alzheimer’s Risk Factors

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Alzheimer's Risk Factors: Are You at Risk?

There are some aspects of our lives that can increase the likelihood of getting particular diseases. These are called risk factors and usually relate to our lifestyles, environments and genetic backgrounds.

Risk factors for Alzheimer's disease do not directly cause the diseases but present an increased chance of developing Alzheimer's. With that said, it is entirely possible to have all of the Alzheimer's risk factors and not develop it.

It’s also possible not to have any risk factors present and still develop the disease. Some risk factors can be changed and others cannot.

Risk Factors for Dementia and Alzheimer's

1. Age

The most prominent risk factor for developing Alzheimer’s disease is something none of us have any control over.

Without question, the largest risk factor of all for Alzheimer’s disease development is our age, with the majority of people developing the condition being over 65. Nearly one-third of all people over the age of 85 have Alzheimer’s disease.

Unfortunately, none of us can do anything about aging, and it is important to know that getting older does not make Alzheimer’s disease a certainty.

2. Family History

Another risk factor for the development of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia is family history.

Research has shown that people who have a parent or sibling with the disease are more likely to develop it themselves. The risk increases if more than one person in their family has Alzheimer’s. When Alzheimer’s runs in families, it is possible that both genetics and environmental factors are at work.

Although there is a connection with family history and the development of Alzheimer’s, familial Alzheimer’s disease is relatively rare, accounting for only 5% of the total number of cases of the condition.

3. Genetics

Scientists have conclusive evidence that genetics play a role in the development of Alzheimer’s disease. There

are some genes that they have discovered that only increase our risk of developing the condition.

However, some genes have been discovered that directly cause the disease and guarantee that a person carrying them will develop it. These genes are found in the proteins called amyloid precursor protein (APP), presenilin-1 (PS-1) and presenilin-2 (PS-2).

4. Gender

There is some debate amongst researchers as to whether women are at higher risk of developing Alzheimer's than men. There is no conclusive evidence, and more research is needed.

One theory is that it may seem that a higher number of women develop the condition, but this might be because women typically live longer than men, and since age is the most significant risk factor for the disease this could be the contributing factor.

5. Other Medical Conditions

There are some other conditions which increase a person's likelihood of developing Alzheimer's disease. These include multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, HIV, chronic kidney disease, Down syndrome and some other forms of learning disabilities.

How Can Alzheimer's Be Prevented?

With some of the most significant risk factors for dementia development being entirely out of our control, it can seem as though there is nothing we can do.

However, more recent evidence suggests that there may be other factors that contribute to our overall risk of developing dementia that is within our control.

Healthy Heart, Healthy Brain

There's a strong link between the health of our hearts and the health of our brains.

This is a logical connection because the brain is kept nourished by one of the body's richest networks of blood vessels and the heart's role is to pump the blood through these vessels to the brain. If the heart is in poor health and doesn't pump the blood effectively to the brain, then the brain becomes undernourished.

Conditions that have been shown to increase the likelihood of developing dementia are heart disease, strokes, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. All of these conditions damage the heart and blood vessels.

6 Simple Things You Can Do to Take Care of Your Heart and Brain

There are many lifestyle changes that we can make to have optimal heart health and inadvertently take care of our brains at the same time.

Maintain a Healthy Weight

This reduces our risk of type 2 diabetes, stroke and heart disease — and probably of dementia too. An excellent place to begin is to follow your health care provider's recommendations about exercise and diet.

Many people find it helpful to keep a diary of their food intake and exercise every day. It's also important to remember that alcohol contains many calories. You could join a local weight loss group to access support from your peers, and this is often a successful approach.

If you have attempted to make changes with limited success, your doctor will be able to offer you advice.

Stay Active

It’s recommended to exercise for at least half an hour, five times a week. You’ll need to be active enough to elevate your heart rate and get a bit short of breath. Walking, cycling, swimming and exercise or dance classes are all perfect ways of doing this.

Regular physical exercise in middle-aged or older adults has been shown to reduce the risk of developing dementia. It’s also good for your heart and your mental health. Physical activity has many health benefits even if you have no desire to lose weight.

Quit Smoking

Smoking increases our risk of developing dementia by harming our lungs, heart and circulation.

Also, if you smoke and would like to try quitting, talk to your doctor. They will be able to provide help and advice about stopping smoking.

Brain and Memory Exercises

Reading, doing puzzles, playing cards or learning something new are all great ways to exercise your brain. If you can keep your mind sharp, you will likely reduce your risk of dementia.

There is some evidence to suggest that keeping socially engaged and having a good social network can also reduce your dementia risk. So, visit with people, invite them to come to you, join a club or volunteer, or take a class and combine learning with socializing!

Eat a Healthy Diet

A healthy diet is one with a high proportion of fruit, vegetables, unrefined cereals, oily fish and olive oil. Red meat, sugar and processed foods should be avoided. Eating a healthy diet will help reduce your risk of dementia as well as heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes.

You should try to drastically reduce your consumption of saturated fats (found in cakes, biscuits and most cheeses) and limit sugary treats. Watch your salt intake as well, because salt raises your blood pressure and your risk of stroke with it. Always read the food labels to see what it contains and seek out healthy options.

One study suggested that eating apples can reduce our dementia risk because they work similarly to Alzheimer’s medications that stimulate the neurotransmitter called acetylcholine. It’s also been recommended that coffee can help block the buildup of Alzheimer’s brain toxins.

Dark chocolate has also been shown to improve blood circulation and lower blood pressure. Fruits that contain fisetin, such as strawberries, mangoes, apples, grapes and peaches can help reduce our dementia risk due to their anti-inflammatory properties.

Reduce Your Alcohol Consumption

The recommended limits for alcohol consumption were changed in 2016. The new restrictions are now set at a maximum of 14 units each week for both men and women. These 14 units should be consumed over three or more days. This is the equivalent to four or five large glasses of wine or seven pints of beer or lager with a lower alcohol percentage.

If you regularly exceed these weekly limits, you will increase your risk of developing dementia. Also, if you are finding it difficult to cut down on what you drink, talk to your doctor about what support is available for you.

Take Control

Most people will be invited to attend a regular mid-life health check at the doctors. It’s important to participate in this appointment and take control of your health.

It’s like a driver's test for your body and will include a check of your weight, blood pressure and possibly your cholesterol level too. These indicators are linked to dementia and the conditions that are now believed to be strong risk factors for dementia (heart disease, stroke and diabetes).

You might already be living with one of these conditions long term, and if so you need to follow professional advice about medicines, lifestyle and how best to manage your illness.

If at any time you feel that you might be becoming depressed, reach out and seek help early. Don’t suffer in silence. There are many resources available to you to help change the way you feel.