



Dementia

Key Facts

- 1-in-9 Americans over 65 has Alzheimer's disease. (Alzheimer's Association)
- When the first wave of baby boomers reaches age 85 (in 2031), it is projected that more than 3 million people age 85 and older will have Alzheimer's. (Alzheimer's Association)
- One-third of Americans over age 85 are afflicted with the illness. (Alzheimer's Association)

Dementia is an illness that affects the brain, decreasing how well the brain works. Memory and other functions of the brain are often affected. Alzheimer's disease is the most well-known but there are many other forms of dementia.

Facts About Dementia: Overview

Some loss of mental ability is normal with age; however, a decline in thinking ability that cannot be explained by aging alone may be due to a syndrome called Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI). MCI can affect one or more areas of thinking (cognition), such as memory, speech, or decision making. Half of individuals with MCI will go on to get dementia.

Symptoms of MCI are often subtle and can be mistaken for normal age-related decline. Individuals with MCI often have balance and coordination problems that are not part of normal aging.

Most Common Types of Dementia

- Alzheimer's Disease – The most common type of dementia. It affects memory first and later progresses to affect other cognitive (brain) abilities, such as speech, ability to reason, and movement.
- Vascular or Multi-Infarct Dementia – This type of dementia is often the result of a stroke in which small areas of the brain are irreversibly damaged. Onset of vascular dementia is often sudden. Symptoms depend upon area of brain affected, but often memory and other cognitive functions, such as decision-making, are impaired.
- Dementia with Lewy Bodies – Leads to a decrease in cognitive ability, hallucinations, movement problems, and delusions
- Frontotemporal Dementias – Affects personality and speech but not memory.

Preventing and Slowing the Progression of Dementia

There is no known way to prevent dementia. However, there are actions that you can take to reduce your risk for dementia and, in some cases, slow the progression of the disease. These actions include:

Diet

A diet that includes a lot of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains may reduce the risk of developing dementia. These foods appear to protect brain neurons from chemicals, called free radicals, that damage cells. The protective chemicals in these foods are called anti-oxidants. Other foods that may protect against dementia include curcumin, the main ingredient in the spice turmeric, and omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish.

Exercise

Exercise leads to a healthier brain, just as it leads to better health for the rest of the body. Exercise and physical activity improve cognitive performance and reduce cognitive decline. The amount of exercise does not have to be extreme. Research has found that moderate activity levels (for example, exercising just 3 times a week) decrease the risk of developing dementia. The effect is increased with a greater variety of activities and there appears to be a benefit even if exercise is started late in life.

Keep Your Heart Healthy

The same factors that protect against heart disease help reduce some of the risk factors for dementia. These include, in addition to exercising and healthy eating, not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, controlling blood pressure, relaxing and reducing stress.

Mental Exercise

Stimulation of the mind increases the number and strength of connections between the brain cells, strengthens the brain cells you have, and even increases the number of brain cells slightly. Examples of mental exercises that are particularly effective include solving puzzles, learning something new, reading challenging material, playing board games, playing a musical instrument, and dancing.

Protect Your Head

Head injury is associated with increased risk for dementia. Protect your head with helmets during sports, wear seat belts, and avoid sports and situations that involve repeated injury to the head.

Socialize

Older people who engage in regular social activities show less cognitive decline. One reason for this effect is that social activities promote new connections between brain cells.

Learn more

Alzheimer's Association

<http://www.alz.org/>

Dementia Friendly America

<http://www.dfamerica.org/>

National Institute on Aging

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/alzheimers-disease-fact-sheet>

Community of Hope AME Church

Pastor: Rev Tony Lee

Assist Pastor: Rev Bill Lee

Executive Minister: Rev. Dr Nancy Lee

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