

## Preventing Well – Steps to Reduce Risk of Dementia

Americans are benefitting from the tremendous efforts in health promotion and prevention. We are enjoying record longevity as strides have been made in the prevention and treatment of heart disease, cancer, stroke and other chronic conditions. As Alzheimer's disease is impacting about 1/3 of all older adults, there is an urgent need to find preventive strategies to reduce the risks. Fortunately, while efforts are underway to find better medical treatments (including prevention), there are focused efforts taking into account lifestyle factors that can reduce risk or delay the onset of Alzheimer's. What do we know to date?

- **Physical activity:** Several studies show that people who are physically active often demonstrate less cognitive decline and a lower risk of dementia than people who are sedentary. This could be even more important in mid-life as physical activity is associated with a lower risk of dementia. For those with dementia, regular exercise appears to enhance both cognitive and functional abilities. Take away: We all need to break a sweat for at least 30 minutes/day, 5 days a week for optimal brain health.
- **Diet:** Studies evaluating the benefits of nutrition on brain health are demonstrating that the Mediterranean and DASH diets may be helpful in preventing cognitive decline. The Mediterranean diet includes eating fruits and vegetables (the color of the rainbow) while also consuming fish. The Dietary Approach to Systolic Hypertension (DASH) diet emphasizes vegetables, fruits and low-fat dairy foods with moderate amounts of whole grains, fish, poultry and nuts. Take away: Just like grandma told you – “Eat your vegetables!”
- **Cognitive activity:** Studies have shown that people with higher levels of education have a lower occurrence of dementia. Several observational studies have reported that people who engage in mentally stimulating activities—such as learning, reading or playing games—at younger ages and older ages are less likely to develop dementia compared to those people who do not engage in these activities. It is thought that people develop “cognitive reserve” which is protective as we age. While the benefits of “cognitive training” have not been proven to date, those who participate in these activities demonstrate that they are more mentally agile than those who do not. Take away: Use it or lose it has its merits.
- **Social connection:** People with fewer social networks and low social engagement may be more likely to develop dementia compared with those who are socially connected. Social engagement through visits with friends and relatives, going to movies, clubs, centers, and church or synagogues, and volunteering may be protective against developing cognitive impairment. Take away: We were not meant to do life alone.
- **Control vascular risk factors:** Studies demonstrate that well controlled blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes can reduce the risk of developing dementia in old age. That means for people with a diagnosis of hypertension, hyperlipidemia and diabetes, it is essential to maintain tight control of these conditions and have routine follow-up with a healthcare provider. For

many, optimizing weight and increasing physical activity will have added benefit. Managing hypertension in mid-life appears to be particularly important. Take away: Know your numbers (i.e., blood pressure, lipids, blood sugar).

It's never too late to improve overall health and well-being. Take control of what you can. Keep your annual well-check with your healthcare provider and ask questions about steps you can take to minimize your risk of dementia. There is hope in prevention.