

Dementia and Alzheimer's: 13 Bad Brain Health Habits

Not Sleeping Enough

We all have some bad habits, but some of these bad habits can harm your brain. **Skimping on sleep is one of those bad habits.** Those who do not get enough Zzzs are more likely to get dementia and Alzheimer's compared to those who get adequate sleep. Lack of sleep in older adults increases the risk of excessive daytime sleepiness, depression, and problems with attention and memory. They are also more likely to fall at night and rely on more sleep aids (both over-the-counter and prescription kinds). People who have trouble falling asleep at night should avoid caffeine, alcohol, and watching TV or using the computer in the evening. If you have trouble sleeping, practice a soothing bedtime routine in



the evening to help you wind down and get to sleep.

Being Socially Isolated

Humans are social creatures. We need human contact to survive and thrive. It is also vital for healthy brain function. Perceived social isolation and loneliness are risk factors for poorer cognitive performance, depression, and faster cognitive decline. **People who have friends, even a few close friends, are less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and brain decline.** They are also happier and more productive. If you would like to meet new people, take up some social hobbies where you can meet others. Dancing, tennis, and bridge are a few examples of activities where you can get out and meet new people.



Eating Junk Food

Neuroscientists who conducted the MIND diet studies found that **eating certain foods promotes brain health and avoiding other foods helps guard against decreased brain function. To boost brain health, limit your intake of cheese, butter, margarine, and fried and fast food to no more than 1 serving per week. Red meat promotes inflammation and is bad for your brain.** The results of neuroscience MIND diet studies determined you should eat fewer than 4 servings of red meat per week. **Sugar and pastries are not good** for you either. Limit your intake of these to fewer than 5 servings per week. In addition to recommending foods to avoid, the MIND diet offers recommendations of foods to eat to preserve brain function and slow mental decline. Eat leafy greens, whole grains, nuts, and berries that are rich in antioxidants and beneficial fats that protect your brain. These foods provide nutrients that benefit your entire body and combat aging.



Listening to Loud Music

Hearing loss is linked to brain issues including brain shrinkage and an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease. One possibility is that the brain has to work harder to process what is being said and it is not able to store what was heard into memory. Protect against hearing loss by turning the volume up on your device up by more than 60% of the maximum volume. **Do not listen to your device for more than a couple of hours at a time.** Listening to a device that is too loud can permanently damage your hearing in as little as 30 minutes. Protect your hearing to protect your brain.



Being Sedentary

Physical inactivity is linked to a higher risk of dementia. It also increases the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease, all of which are linked to Alzheimer's disease. You do not need to overextend yourself. **Gardening or walking for at least 30 minutes at least 3 times per week is enough to reduce the risk of dementia and other chronic conditions. Walking is one of the most effective and easiest types of exercise you can do.**

All you need to get started is a pair of sneakers. Physical activity positively affects the health of your blood vessels, including those in your brain. It also improves neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to form new connections in response to experience, learning, or an injury. Exercise has benefits for stress reduction, too. Physical activity increases oxygen delivery to your muscles and brain.



Quit Smoking

Smokers have an increased risk of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. Smoking shrinks your brain and it causes memory loss. It damages blood vessels and puts you at risk for diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke. **Many people try to quit smoking multiple times before succeeding.** If you need help to quit smoking, talk to your doctor about nicotine patches and prescription medications. These are effective treatments that may help you accomplish your goal. There are quit smoking programs and other resources that your doctor can recommend for you.



Overeating

Overeating and consuming too many calories is associated with an increased risk of cognitive impairment and dementia. Overeating leads to weight gain and obesity which contributes to diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. All of these conditions increase the risk of brain conditions and Alzheimer's disease. Talk to your doctor about how best to control your weight and how to lose weight if you are overweight. Your doctor may recommend that you see a nutritionist to design a diet and nutrition plan that will work for you. If you believe overeating is a symptom of an eating disorder, a therapist can help you learn strategies to change unwanted patterns and behaviors that lead to you overeat.



Not Getting Enough Sunlight

Researchers have discovered that we need natural light for optimal brain function and to combat depression. Adequate sun exposure is also necessary for you to maintain adequate vitamin D levels. Vitamin D is necessary for healthy bones and to boost mood. Sun exposure alters levels of the neurotransmitter, serotonin, and the hormone, melatonin. Get adequate sun exposure to boost mental health and cognitive function and to protect against cognitive decline and dementia. Scientists have determined that exposure to natural sunlight is necessary for prevention of brain conditions. Research results from clinical studies suggests that fair-skinned people are able to make sufficient vitamin D levels with as little as 15 minutes of sun exposure per day while dark-skinned people may need up to several hours of sun exposure to manufacture adequate levels of vitamin D. Learn your safe limit for sun exposure. Be careful not to burn as sunburns are associated with higher rates of skin cancer and potentially deadly melanoma.



Being Dehydrated

Dehydration affects your brain and contributes to cognitive dysfunction. People who are dehydrated have difficulties with executive function, which are cognitive processes you need to control behavior. Dehydration also negatively affects the ability to pay attention and it increases reaction times for motor tasks. Drink plenty of fluids and replace electrolytes lost during hot weather and exercise. By the time you feel thirsty, you are already dehydrated. Your urine should be a pale yellow color. If it is darker, you are likely dehydrated. If it is clear, you may be taking in too many fluids.



Eating Too Much Sugar

Eating a diet high in sugar impairs brain function by altering the levels of beneficial bacteria in the gut. One study found that mice that ate a diet high in sucrose had difficulty with spatial memory and cognitive flexibility. Sugar feeds harmful gut bugs, like Clostridiales (Clostridium spp), that are associated with decreased cognitive flexibility. Sugar consumption is also associated with decreased Bacteroidales (Bacteroides spp) population levels, which, when reduced, also inhibits gut function. High-sugar foods include orange juice, fruit juice, honey, pastries, cakes, candy, and ice cream.



Sustaining Head Injuries

Withstanding **repeated head injuries while playing contact sports or being physically active is associated with traumatic brain injury that increases the risk of cognitive problems, mood disorders, headaches, speech problems, and aggressive behavior.** Participation in contact sports like football, baseball, softball, and basketball contributes to many head injuries every year in the U.S. Participating in solo activities like cycling, scuba diving, surfing, and driving all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) leads to thousands of head injuries every year as well. Take precautions to protect yourself when playing sports and engaging in physical activity. Seek help right away if you suffer a head injury.



Living in a Polluted Environment

One study found that people who lived close to roads or highways that experienced heavy traffic had a higher incidence of dementia. Being exposed to pollution from cars may negatively affected cognition, too. Live away from highways and roads with heavy traffic, if you can. Invest in an air cleaner that removes pollutants from indoor air.



Eating Too Much Salt

High blood pressure, especially during midlife, is associated with a higher risk of cognitive deficits and stroke. The systolic number, which represents the blood pressure when the heart is contracting, seems to be more important to the later risk of cognitive decline than the diastolic number. The latter represents the blood pressure when the heart is at rest between beats. Most Americans consume too much salt and not enough potassium, both of which negatively affect blood pressure. **Avoid salty foods, don't add salt to your food, and monitor your blood pressure.** See your doctor for treatment if it starts creeping up.



Reviewed by [Charles Patrick Davis, MD, PhD](#) on 8/29/2018

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