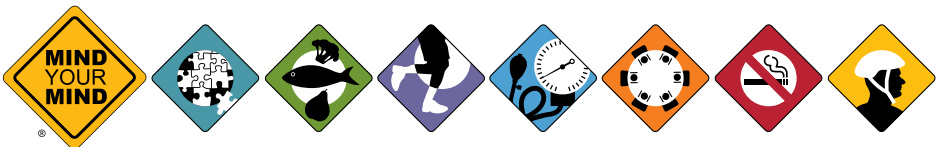




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Introduction

This booklet is for anyone interested in the health of their brain and potentially reducing their risk of dementia.

The information provided is based on the best scientific evidence currently available.

Dementia cannot yet be prevented or cured, but research has demonstrated that certain lifestyle and health factors may help to reduce the risk or even delay the onset of dementia. This booklet provides an overview of those factors and what you can do to reduce your risk.

Following the advice in this booklet is not a guarantee against developing dementia. We all know people who have lived very healthy lives but then developed dementia. This isn't their fault. Unfortunately we just can't control all of the factors that affect our risk of developing certain diseases. But, there are some risk factors we can control. So it's important to do what we can to stay as healthy as we can.



About the brain



The brain is made up of many different parts and these parts work together to keep us alive and to help us make sense of, and participate in, the world around us.

The brain helps us to:

- ◆ Plan and organise things
- ◆ Make decisions
- ◆ Understand information
- ◆ Pay attention
- ◆ Behave appropriately
- ◆ Remember things
- ◆ Speak
- ◆ See, hear, taste, smell and feel
- ◆ Read and write
- ◆ Recognise people and objects
- ◆ Breathe
- ◆ Control body temperature

Keeping our brains healthy is important for living a fulfilling, healthy and long life.

What happens to the brain with age?

Physical changes start to occur in our brains around middle age and these lead to changes in the way our brain works as we get older. These changes include the loss of brain cells and the connections between them, which means that our brains work slower and less efficiently. The extent of change varies from person to person.

As we get older, it is normal for some changes to occur in our memory and our thinking. For example, you might be a little more forgetful than you used to be or not be as quick in your thinking as you previously were. It might require a little more effort to remember something or work something out in your mind than it once did. This is all normal and is called 'age-related cognitive decline'. Some older people will experience a significant amount of decline and others not much at all.

Apart from these normal changes in the brain, as we get older the brain becomes more prone to damage from a range of illnesses which greatly affect how the brain works. One of these illnesses is dementia.

What is dementia?

Further information about dementia can be found at www.alzheimers.org.au or by contacting the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

Dementia is a medical term. It describes a combination of symptoms that can include changes in thinking, memory and behaviour. The symptoms of dementia can be caused by several different diseases of the brain.

Dementia gradually affects a person's ability to carry out daily tasks so that it can be difficult to live independently. Daily tasks such as driving, shopping, getting dressed, eating, getting to and from places, managing money, reading, speech and writing may all be affected.

Dementia is usually progressive, which means that the symptoms begin gradually and get worse over time. As yet, there is no cure for dementia.

There are a number of different types of dementia. The most common type is Alzheimer's disease. Other common types are vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and frontotemporal dementia.

What causes dementia?

Dementia is caused by diseases that damage the brain, such as Alzheimer's disease. What causes the disease in most cases is still unknown, but it is likely to be a combination of factors.

People often wonder if dementia is inherited. There are several genes that can cause dementia. However, these are extremely rare and very few families are carriers of these genes. People who have these genes in their family are generally aware of this. For the majority of people who get dementia, a specific gene is not responsible and why they developed dementia is not known.

We know that several factors, while not directly causing dementia, are associated with an increased risk of developing dementia. Some of these factors we can change and some we can't.

Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and many people live to very old age without being affected by significant memory and thinking changes.

The risk factors for dementia that we can't change are:

- ◆ Getting older
- ◆ Having a family history of dementia.

Getting older

The risk of developing dementia increases with age and most cases occur in older people. From the age of 65, the risk of having dementia doubles every 5 years. It affects around 1 in 70 people aged 65 to 69 and 1 in 4 people aged 85 to 89. Most people who are worried about their memory do not have dementia.

Family history

A family history of a disease means that someone in your family has had the disease. It may be a parent, sibling or other close relative. Having a family history of dementia is associated with a slightly increased risk of developing dementia yourself. But it's important to know that this doesn't mean you will develop dementia. In fact, most people with a family history of dementia do not develop it themselves.

Unfortunately we can't do anything about getting older or our family history, but there are other risk factors for dementia that we can do something about.

Risk factors we can change include:

- ◆ Lack of mental stimulation
- ◆ High saturated fat diet
- ◆ Physical inactivity
- ◆ High blood pressure
- ◆ High blood cholesterol
- ◆ Diabetes
- ◆ Obesity
- ◆ Smoking
- ◆ Excessive alcohol intake
- ◆ Social isolation
- ◆ Head injury

What can I do to reduce my risk of dementia?

We still have a lot to learn about how to reduce dementia risk. Current evidence suggests that a range of lifestyle and health factors may reduce the risk or delay the onset of dementia. The evidence for dementia risk reduction comes from many international research studies involving large groups of people.

Most of the research to date has focused on Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia, the two most common types of dementia. We don't yet know a lot about factors that affect the risk of other types of dementia. However, scientists believe there is overlap between the different types of dementia, so factors that may reduce risk or increase risk of one type of dementia may also do the same for other types of dementia.

The research shows that people who follow a 'brain-healthy' lifestyle have better brain function and a lower risk of developing dementia on average than people who don't.

But this lifestyle IS NOT a guarantee against developing dementia.



To help look after your brain health and reduce your risk of dementia, Alzheimer's Australia has developed seven Mind your Mind signposts or health messages.



The Mind your Mind signposts are:

- ◆ **Mind your Brain** – keep your brain active
- ◆ **Mind your Diet** – eat healthily
- ◆ **Mind your Body** – be physically active
- ◆ **Mind your Health Checks** – manage blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar and weight
- ◆ **Mind your Social Life** – participate in social activities
- ◆ **Mind your Habits** – avoid tobacco smoke, drink alcohol in moderation and manage sleep problems
- ◆ **Mind your Head** – protect your head from serious injury

The Mind your Mind signposts are not listed in order of importance. They are all important and the most benefit will come from following all of them.

Following the Mind your Mind signposts is particularly important once you reach middle age, as this is when changes in the brain start to occur. But it's even better if you follow them throughout life. It's never too late to start either, as brain function can be improved and protected at any age. Whatever your age the Mind your Mind signposts are good for brain health as well as overall health and wellbeing.

It's important to note that none of the activities in this booklet have been shown to prevent progression or cure dementia in those who already have it. However, they may help someone with dementia feel better and stay healthier.

Mind your Brain

The Mind your Mind signposts

Keep your brain active

You've probably heard the phrase 'use it or lose it'. This is certainly the case when it comes to keeping your brain active and staying mentally sharp into older age.

The more brain activities you do, the longer you are able to do them for and the more complex the activity, the lower your risk of dementia is likely to be. It doesn't matter whether you're working, studying, retired or doing something else. Keeping your brain challenged with new activities may help reduce your risk of dementia regardless of your age. Challenge yourself often and keep learning throughout life.

Scientists have found that challenging the brain with new activities helps to build new brain cells and strengthen connections between brain cells. This helps to give the brain more 'reserve' or 'back up' so it can cope better and keep working properly if any of the brain cells are damaged or die.

What types of brain activities are best?

The key idea here is doing new things that are mentally challenging. Any type of activity that challenges your brain is likely to have benefit. There is no evidence yet to suggest that there is one type of activity that is better than another.

There are many ways to challenge your brain. Rather than just doing one type of activity or those activities that you are good at, try different things and choose activities that make you think and learn new skills.

The more you do the better, so try to build a variety of mentally stimulating activities into your day. Importantly, choose activities that interest you and that you enjoy. Doing activities that you don't enjoy or that don't interest you can be stressful and may do more harm than good. Similarly, spending large amounts of time on brain activities is not recommended. You need to include other equally enjoyable and important activities in your day.

Some tips for keeping your brain active



- ◆ Take up a hobby such as painting, carpentry, sewing, craftwork, sculpting, metal work.
- ◆ Enrol in a course such as woodwork, gardening, computer, business, cooking, welding, mechanics, yoga.
- ◆ Read the newspaper or different styles of books.
- ◆ Write poetry or keep a diary.
- ◆ Play board games or cards.
- ◆ Learn to dance, play a new musical instrument or speak another language.
- ◆ Participate in cultural activities such as going to the theatre, visiting a gallery or museum or going to a concert.
- ◆ Prepare a new recipe, put together a piece of furniture or build a model.
- ◆ Get involved in a club or local community group.
- ◆ Volunteer to help out at your local school, community centre or your favourite charity.
- ◆ Learn about a topic that you are interested in by searching the internet or visiting your local library.
- ◆ Do jigsaw, crossword, word or number puzzles.

What about brain training games and computer programs – are they useful?

There are a number of brain (“cognitive”) training programs available either as handheld devices or for use on a computer. There is some evidence that some of these programs can improve the brain function/s that the program is designed to train. Some of these programs have also been shown to improve general brain function including memory but others have not. There is no evidence yet that brain training can delay or prevent the onset of dementia. If you wish to use a brain training program then do – but also do a range of other activities that are complex, ongoing and frequent.

Mind your Diet

Eat healthily

Healthy eating is important for a healthy body and a healthy brain. The brain needs a range of nutrients, fluid and energy to work properly.

The relationship between the food we eat and dementia risk isn't yet clear. There is some evidence that a high intake of saturated fats increases dementia risk and that a diet rich in antioxidants may reduce this risk. A range of other nutrients such as some vitamins and omega 3 fats are also being investigated. However, more research is needed before we can make specific recommendations about food and dementia risk.

At this stage, the advice is to follow general healthy eating guidelines:

- ◆ Eat a variety of foods from different food groups.
- ◆ Include vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts, wholegrain breads and cereals, including pasta and rice.
- ◆ Choose fish, lean meats, eggs, reduced-fat dairy foods and soy foods.
- ◆ Choose monounsaturated and polyunsaturated oils such as canola, olive, sunflower, soybean, safflower and flaxseed and margarine spreads made from these types of oils.
- ◆ Limit foods high in saturated fat such as butter, deep fried foods, processed deli meats, pastries, cakes and biscuits.

Following these guidelines will ensure an adequate intake of the nutrients needed for good brain health, will provide a range of antioxidants and will help to limit saturated fat intake.

Some tips for healthy eating



- ◆ Add colour to your meals by aiming for five serves of different coloured vegetables each day. Include them in sandwiches or salads, snack on vegetable sticks (they're great with dips), and include them in your main meal of the day.
- ◆ Eat fruit every day. Add some fruit to your cereal or yoghurt or have some as a quick, nutritious snack or dessert.
- ◆ Include legumes in a couple of meals each week. For example mix some kidney beans in with mince meat when making lasagna, add chickpeas to a curry or make a bean salad.
- ◆ Plain frozen or canned vegetables and fruit are nutritious and save on preparation time.
- ◆ Choose wholemeal or wholegrain breads and cereals – they contain more fibre and they taste great too.
- ◆ Use reduced-fat milk or reduced-fat yoghurt on your cereal. Reduced-fat yoghurt also makes a scrumptious dessert or snack.
- ◆ Replace butter with margarine spreads or vegetable oils, such as canola, olive, sunflower and safflower oils.
- ◆ Eat fish – choose canned, frozen or fresh. Limit your intake of deep-fried fish.
- ◆ Choose lean cuts of meat or remove the fat yourself before cooking. Remove the skin from poultry.
- ◆ Drink plenty of water – it's convenient, cheap and a great thirst-quencher.



Mind your Body

Be physically active

Participating in regular physical activity provides a range of health benefits. It helps to:

- ◆ reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.
- ◆ lower high blood pressure.
- ◆ build healthy bones and muscles.
- ◆ assist with weight control.
- ◆ improve brain function.

Physical activity may also help to lower the risk of dementia.

The benefits of physical activity on the brain are that it helps blood flow and oxygen supply to the brain. It also promotes brain cell growth and survival.

It's not yet known if one type of physical activity is better than another, or how much or how often we need to be physically active to reduce dementia risk.

But we do know that for general good health, it is recommended that you participate in at least 30 minutes of physical activity each day. This may sound like a lot, but you don't have to do the 30 minutes all at once. You can still get health benefits from three 10 minute sessions of physical activity or two 15 minute sessions.

One of the easiest ways to find time to be physically active is to build it into your normal daily routine. So when you have to do something, think about how you could do it in a physically active way. It's also a good idea to try and plan some extra time to be physically active each week. For example, organise with a friend to go for a walk or bike ride or catch up for a game of golf.

Physical activity is important for overall health and needs to be done every day for the greatest health benefit. For a healthy body and a healthy brain, it's important to choose a range of activities that you enjoy and to stay physically active throughout life.

It's also important to choose a variety of activities that help with general fitness, balance, strength and flexibility.

Some tips for being physically active



Build physical activity into your normal daily routine:

- ◆ Before you get in the car, think about whether you could walk or cycle instead.
- ◆ If at work, go for a walk at lunchtime with workmates.
- ◆ If at home, take the kids to the park to play or go for a walk together.
- ◆ Take the dog for a walk.
- ◆ Use the stairs when you can.
- ◆ Make the most of time spent in front of the TV and do some stretching exercises.
- ◆ If you have a cordless phone, walk around the room or house while having conversations, instead of sitting.
- ◆ Choose a car park away from your destination and walk the extra distance.
- ◆ Do your own gardening and housework rather than paying someone.
- ◆ If you're sitting for more than an hour, get up and move around even if it's just for a few minutes.
- ◆ Get off the bus or train one stop early and walk the rest of the way.

Other ideas:

- ◆ Meet a friend to go walking, cycling, swimming or jogging.
- ◆ Take up a sport and play socially or competitively.
- ◆ Join a gym.
- ◆ Consider tai chi, yoga or Pilates.
- ◆ Go dancing, sailing or bushwalking.
- ◆ Work your muscles using your own body weight (for example doing push ups or squats) or use elastic tubing or bands.

Mind your Health Checks

Manage blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar and weight

The Mind your Health Checks signpost is all about monitoring key health factors and making sure they are at healthy levels for you.

Research shows that people who have high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes or are obese (particularly around middle age), have a greater risk of developing dementia later in life.

Whilst all of these health factors are important, research has shown that the treatment of high blood pressure reduces the development of dementia. So it is vital to have healthy blood pressure to reduce your risk of dementia.

Treatment of high blood cholesterol, diabetes or obesity is necessary for heart health and is likely to also protect brain health. And the good news is that all of these conditions are easily identified and treatable. If they are too high, you can do something about them.

So for a healthy heart and brain, it's important to know your blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar and weight and whether they are at healthy levels for you. This is particularly important once you reach middle age. Depending on your family history and your own medical history, you may need to have these factors checked from an earlier age.

What is a healthy level for blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar and weight?

Health checks are very important for your heart and your brain. Make sure you have your blood pressure, cholesterol levels and blood sugar checked regularly as advised by your doctor, and keep an eye on your weight. If you are prescribed treatment, be sure to take your medication, eat healthily and exercise as recommended by your doctor or other health professionals.

The healthy levels for blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar and weight for each person will vary depending on a range of factors including age, overall health status, medical history and family history.

The best way to find out if your blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar or weight are too high is to see your doctor. Your doctor can consider all the relevant factors and work out if any of these are a problem.

Some tips to keep your health in check

Visit your doctor and discuss these issues with him/her. Your doctor will advise if there is a problem and discuss treatment options with you. In many cases some changes to your lifestyle, particularly eating and physical activity habits, will be needed. In other cases medications combined with healthy lifestyle changes will be needed.

Your doctor may also refer you to other health professionals such as an Accredited Practising Dietitian, an Exercise Physiologist or a Diabetes Educator.



Mind your Social Life

Participate in social activities

Participating in social activities is great for overall health, including heart and mental health and has also been shown to be good for brain health and reducing dementia risk. It seems that the more involved in social activities you are, and the stronger your network of family and friends, the less chance you have of developing dementia.

To look after your brain health, be social in ways that interest you, that you feel comfortable with and that you enjoy. Being social and interacting with others exercises brain cells and strengthens the connections between them.

Being social is about taking opportunities to mix and chat with other people and not feeling alone and isolated. Feeling alone and isolated is not the same as living on your own. It's a feeling of having no one around to support you, to talk with or to do things with. If you feel alone and isolated, it's important to seek help. Contact your doctor, community health service or local council to seek assistance.

To stay socially active, keep in touch with family and friends and take opportunities to mix with others as often as is comfortable for you. It can be as simple as chatting to people at the local shops, visiting family or phoning a friend.

Social activities involving physical and/or mental activity provide even greater benefit for reducing dementia risk. So try to do some of these as well.



Some tips for staying socially active



Combine social activity with physical and mental activity. For example:

- ◆ Dancing – it's generally done with other people, you are constantly moving and you have to remember the steps.
- ◆ Tai chi in a group – it's social, it involves movement and remembering the next moves.
- ◆ Orienteering in a pair or group – you're with someone else, you are constantly on the move and you have to work out how to get to the next point.
- ◆ Travelling – often involves other people and generally some physical activity such as walking, setting up a tent or organising a caravan. There is also the mental challenge of planning your itinerary and the best way to get there.

Other ideas

- ◆ Volunteer to help out at your favourite charity, local school or community group.
- ◆ Go walking or have a meal with a friend or family member.
- ◆ Check out 'what's on' in your community and participate in local activities.
- ◆ Join a group such as a book club, walking group, sporting group or church group.
- ◆ Visit a gallery or museum and go on a guided tour.
- ◆ Organise cards or games nights with friends.
- ◆ Enrol in a class.
- ◆ Phone someone that you haven't spoken to in ages.
- ◆ Take a stroll to your local shops and chat with the shopkeepers.
- ◆ See a movie with friends and review the movie afterwards.
- ◆ Organise to go to a concert, theatre production or sports event with friends or family.
- ◆ Go on a guided holiday.
- ◆ Take up dancing or singing lessons.

Mind your Habits

Avoid tobacco smoke

We all know that smoking is bad for our health. It increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, cancer and many other health problems. We now know that it is bad for our brain health as well. A number of studies have shown that people who smoke have a greater chance of developing dementia than people who don't smoke. There is no safe level of smoking.



If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation

Drinking large quantities of alcohol increases the risk of developing dementia. In fact there is a type of dementia called alcohol related dementia which may develop in anyone who regularly drinks excessive amounts of alcohol over a number of years.

Interestingly, drinking small to moderate amounts of alcohol may reduce dementia risk. And it doesn't matter what type of alcohol you drink. It seems that all types of alcohol in moderate amounts may provide some benefit.

So what's the message? If you enjoy drinking alcohol, drink only in moderation. If you don't drink alcohol, there's no need to start. While moderate drinking seems to be associated with a lower risk, it will not prevent dementia.

Manage sleep problems

When it comes to our sleep patterns there has not been a lot of research, but it appears that some types of ongoing sleep problems may lead to an increased risk of dementia. Having a sleepless night every now and then isn't a health concern. But if you are having ongoing sleep problems then you may be at increased risk of dementia. Many sleep problems are treatable, so see your doctor.

Some tips for minding your habits

- ◆ If you are a smoker, try to quit. Seek advice from QUIT (phone 137 848) or your doctor.
- ◆ Try to avoid breathing in other people's tobacco smoke.
- ◆ If you drink alcohol, follow the national alcohol guidelines for low risk drinking and limit your intake to no more than two standard drinks in any one day. This doesn't mean that you should drink each day, but if you are having a drink keep it to no more than two. If you have other health conditions, you may need to have even less or cut out alcohol altogether.
- ◆ If you don't currently drink alcohol, it is not recommended that you start.
- ◆ If you are having sleeping problems, seek advice from your doctor.

What is a standard drink?

A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol. The amount of alcohol in different alcoholic drinks varies but on average a standard drink is equal to:

- 1 can or stubbie of mid strength beer
- 100ml glass of wine (9.5 – 13% alcohol)*
- 1 nip (30ml) of spirits

*Note that a serving of alcohol is often different to a standard drink. When you get a glass of wine in a bar or restaurant it is often more than 100ml. You may be having 1.5 standard drinks in just one glass of wine.

In Australia it is law for all bottles, cans and casks containing alcoholic drinks to state on the label the approximate number of standard drinks contained in the product. This is a good way to help you keep track of how much you are drinking.

Reference: National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol. Australian Government, 2009.

Mind your Head

Protect your head from serious injury

People who have experienced a severe head injury, particularly with a loss of consciousness for an extended period, are at greater risk of developing dementia. This doesn't mean that you will get dementia if you have suffered a serious head injury – just that your risk is greater on average than someone who hasn't suffered a head injury.

It makes sense that if we damage our head in any way, we could also damage our brain and affect its ability to work properly. Small head injuries, such as a minor bump or cut to the head, are unlikely to lead to any serious health problems. But it's still a good idea to do what you can to protect your head.

Some tips to protect your head

- ◆ When travelling in any type of vehicle, whether it is a car, boat, plane or bus, wear a seatbelt. If anything goes wrong, the seatbelt will offer some protection.
- ◆ Wear a helmet when riding a bike, motorbike or horse and when rollerblading or skateboarding. A helmet might also be needed when playing certain sports.
- ◆ When using a ladder, make sure it is stable or someone is holding it steady.
- ◆ Use handrails when walking up or down stairs or escalators, to stop you from falling.
- ◆ Be careful crossing the road. Watch out for cars and make sure they see you before stepping onto the road. Also watch out for potholes or things that could cause you to trip and fall.
- ◆ Before diving always check the depth of water and don't dive into shallow water.
- ◆ Watch out for passing vehicles when getting on or off trams and buses.

