

Study highlights measures to boost dementia prevention research

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A new study by Alzheimer's Research UK has highlighted the lack of research into dementia prevention and called for changes to the way risk reduction studies are funded and carried out, in a bid to boost evidence on dementia risk factors. The discussion paper, which compiles recommendations from a workshop attended by leading UK academics, clinicians, funders and policymakers, is published in the *Journal of Public Health*.

A mounting body of evidence has linked a number of risk factors to dementia, including lack of exercise, low education, [high blood pressure](#), smoking and diabetes, with some studies now suggesting that up to 30% of Alzheimer's cases may be preventable. However, there are still gaps in our understanding of dementia risk, with a lack of robust evidence to explain how these risk factors may contribute to the development of Alzheimer's and other dementias.

With increasing recognition of the need to improve public health in a bid to reduce the number of people developing dementia, there is a growing need for better evidence to support risk reduction policies. Yet funding for prevention studies is low compared to other areas of dementia research, with risk reduction research accounting for an estimated 5% of UK dementia studies, and just 2% of dementia research globally.

Alzheimer's Research UK set out to understand the barriers that may be blocking this type of research and to identify potential ways to boost prevention studies. The charity hosted a discussion-led workshop with 58

leading experts including prevention researchers, clinicians, research funders and [policymakers](#). Key barriers that emerged from the discussion included:

- The length of time needed to investigate potential preventions for diseases like Alzheimer's, where changes in the brain occur several years before symptoms appear.
- Difficulties in understanding the complexities of how different risk factors interact with each other, and in teasing apart cause from effect.
- Inconsistent methods and study designs, which hinder the ability to pool or compare results of different studies.
- A lack of researchers with expertise in [public health](#) working on dementia.

But the group also identified a number of potential solutions for overcoming these challenges. The paper points to several measures that could improve prevention and risk reduction research, including agreed international standards for study design, and steps to apply experience from fields with more established risk reduction research, such as cardiovascular disease.

The authors also suggest that funders of research should ensure these challenges are taken into account when considering applications for new studies. Recommendations from the workshop are being used to help inform Alzheimer's Research UK's own strategy around prevention, with further announcements on plans due later in the year.

Dr Matthew Norton, Director of Policy and Strategy at Alzheimer's Research UK, who co-authored the report, said:

"There is a compelling need for more high quality research into dementia risk reduction. While research suggests that a healthy lifestyle

can help reduce dementia risk across the population, we still need better [evidence](#) to develop more targeted prevention strategies and underpin public policy.

"Alzheimer's Research UK currently supports some innovative risk reduction studies, but we are keen to expand our own work in this area and we hope other funders will be encouraged to do the same. Prevention research is notoriously complex, and these results suggest that we need to take a new approach to the way these studies are funded and carried out. If we are to have an impact on future generations' dementia risk, it will be essential for us to address some of these challenges to reinvigorate dementia prevention research."

More information: S. Mitchell et al. The future of dementia risk reduction research: barriers and solutions, *Journal of Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdw103](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdw103)

Provided by Alzheimer's Research UK

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