

# 10 ways to reduce your risk of dementia

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Dementia affects millions of Americans—including [nearly one in 10 adults over age 65](#). While the causes of different dementias vary, a 2020 report from a *Lancet* commission identified [several modifiable risk](#)

[factors](#) that together account for around 40% of dementia worldwide.

This means that many dementia cases might be prevented or delayed by living a [healthy lifestyle](#), said Judith Heidebrink, M.D., a neurologist at University of Michigan Health and co-leader of the Michigan Alzheimer's Disease Research Center's Clinical Core.

With the *Lancet* findings as an anchor, Heidebrink is joined by fellow neurologist and center director Henry Paulson, M.D., to share how you can reduce your risk for dementia and maintain a healthy brain throughout your life.

## **1. Keep an eye on your blood pressure**

Heidebrink: Aim for a [systolic blood pressure](#) of 130 mm Hg or lower in midlife (from around age 40). Research has shown that better control of blood pressure during midlife not only reduces the risk of cognitive impairment and dementia but also of [heart attack](#) and stroke.

## **2. Protect your hearing**

Paulson: Be sure to wear ear protection when you're around excessive noise exposure to reduce your risk of hearing loss. Also, use hearing aids when needed. A recent study found that older adults who get a hearing aid for newly diagnosed hearing loss [have a lower risk of dementia in the following three years](#).

## **3. Support efforts to reduce air pollution**

Heidebrink: There is growing evidence linking air pollution, such as the gases and small particles emitted by cars and factories, to cognitive decline and dementia. Encouragingly, sustained improvements in air

quality [appear to reduce the risk of dementia](#).

## **4. Prevent head injury**

Paulson: Physical damage to the brain, including [traumatic brain injury](#), can disrupt normal brain function. Be sure to wear proper protective equipment when playing [contact sports](#) or riding a bike, wear a seat belt in cars and see a physician right away if you have concerns about a concussion or TBI.

## **5. Limit alcohol use and avoid smoking**

Heidebrink: It has long been known that alcohol misuse is associated with damage to the brain and an increased risk of dementia. Limiting alcohol consumption to 1 drink per day appears safest. Smoking tobacco also increases the risk of dementia. Stopping smoking, even later in life, can help reduce the risk.

## **6. Stay cognitively engaged**

Paulson: People with more years of formal education are at [lower risk of dementia](#) than those with fewer years of formal education. This is because keeping your brain cognitively engaged, helps maintain your brain health. Staying cognitively engaged can mean taking a class at a local college or online, or challenging your mind with puzzles, games or a new hobby. Socializing with others also engages your brain, so keeping up with friends and family is helpful.

## **7. Follow a heart healthy diet and maintain regular exercise throughout life**

Paulson: A good rule of thumb is, "If it's good for your heart, it's also

good for your brain." Eating a well-rounded diet full of fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats (such as the Mediterranean diet) can help maintain a healthy weight and mitigate the risk of obesity, [high blood pressure](#), high cholesterol and diabetes, which are known to contribute to dementia in later life.

Maintaining a [regular exercise](#) routine—150 minutes of moderate to intense physical activity throughout your week—helps to maintain good cardiovascular health to ward off dementia.

People often forget how important simple aerobic exercise is for the brain. A brisk walk, or a stint on a stationary bike, three times a week helps your brain work better. And it's good for your body, too.

## **8. Maintain healthy sleep patterns**

Heidebrink: Sleep benefits the mind in many ways. It gives the brain a chance to lock in memories and enhances the ability to learn new skills. Current research suggests that sleep disturbances like [sleep apnea may be linked to a greater risk of developing dementia](#). Getting enough quality sleep could help reduce your risk.

## **9. Stay socially engaged**

Paulson: Studies suggest that remaining socially active throughout life may support [brain](#) health and possibly reduce the risk of dementia. Schedule regular social outings to stay socially connected with friends and family, or choose a [social activity](#) that is meaningful to you, such as volunteering or participating in community groups.

## **10. Take care of your mental health**

Heidebrink: Some [studies](#) have linked a history of depression to dementia in later life. Maintaining social activities and hobbies can help ward off depression, and physical activity can help reduce stress. If you experience signs of depression, anxiety, or another mental health concern, be sure to discuss these with your health care provider.

It's important to note that many dementia risk factors disproportionately affect minority ethnic groups.

"In addition to taking steps as individuals to decrease our own [dementia](#) risk, we should take steps as a society to ensure that everyone has equitable access to an environment and resources that promote [brain health](#)," Heidebrink said.

**More information:** For more information about dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, Lewy body dementia, vascular dementia, frontotemporal dementia and more, visit the [Michigan Alzheimer's Disease Center website](#).

Provided by University of Michigan

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