

Lifestyle changes may slow or prevent Alzheimer's in people at high risk

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New research shows that a set of healthy lifestyle habits can help preserve brain function in folks with mild cognitive impairment or early dementia.

About 71% of patients who ate healthy, exercised regularly and engaged in stress management had their dementia symptoms either remain stable or improve without the use of any drugs, researchers [reported](#) June 7 in the journal *Alzheimer's Research and Therapy*. By comparison, about 68% of patients in a control group without these lifestyle changes experienced a worsening of their symptoms, results show.

Researchers also found that the more patients changed their lives in healthy ways and stuck to those changes, the greater the benefit for their brain power.

This is the first time that lifestyle changes have been shown to have any impact on the progression of dementia and Alzheimer's, researchers said.

"I'm cautiously optimistic and very encouraged by these findings, which may empower many people with new hope and new choices," said lead researcher Dr. Dean Ornish, founder and president of the nonprofit Preventive Medicine Research Institute.

"We do not yet have a cure for Alzheimer's, but as the scientific community continues to pursue all avenues to identify potential treatments, we are now able to offer an improved quality of life to many people suffering from this terrible disease," Ornish added in an institute news release.

One participant said it used to take him weeks to finish reading a book, but after the study he was able to do so in three to four days while remembering most of what he read. A former business executive reported regaining the ability to manage his own finances and retirement, researchers said.

"It was so much a part of my life—who I am, and who I was—it was hard saying that part of me was just gone," researchers quoted him as

saying. "I'm back to reconciling our finances monthly; I keep up to date on our investments. A lot of self-worth comes back."

And a woman said that she now is able to accurately prepare the financial reports for the [family business](#), something she'd been unable to do for five years.

"A deep sense of identity is returning," she told researchers. "It's given me a new lease on life, and yet it's a familiarity and something I've always prided myself on. I'm coming back like I was prior to the disease being diagnosed. I feel like I'm me again—an older but better version of me."

For the study, researchers recruited 51 people with a diagnosis of [mild cognitive impairment](#) or early dementia due to Alzheimer's disease. They were randomly assigned to either the lifestyle change group or a control group.

The people in the lifestyle change group participated in an intensive program with four components:

- A whole-foods, [plant-based diet](#) low in harmful fats, refined carbs, alcohol and sweeteners.
- Moderate aerobic exercise and [strength training](#) at least a half-hour each day.
- Stress management, including meditation, stretching, breathing and guided imagery, for one hour a day.
- Support groups for patients and their partners for one hour three times a week.

Results after 20 weeks showed significant differences in the lifestyle group versus the control group, both in [brain function](#) and in blood-based biomarkers for Alzheimer's like the [protein amyloid](#). Amyloid levels

improved in the lifestyle group but worsened in the control group. In addition, amyloid levels improved more in people who stuck to the lifestyle changes more consistently.

This sort of reduction in amyloid was one piece of evidence that contributed to last year's FDA approval of lecanemab (Leqembi) to treat Alzheimer's, researchers noted. Amyloid tends to form plaques in the brains of Alzheimer's patients.

Lifestyle participants' gut microbiome also showed a significant decrease in organisms that increase risk of Alzheimer's, and an increase in organisms that appear to be protective against Alzheimer's, researchers added.

"There's a desperate need for Alzheimer's treatments," said researcher Rudolph Tanzi, director of the McCance Center for Brain Health at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of the study's clinical sites.

"Biopharma companies have invested billions of dollars in the effort to find medications to treat the disease, but only two Alzheimer's drugs have been approved in the past 20 years—one of which was recently taken off the market and the other is minimally effective and extremely expensive and often has serious side effects such as brain swelling or bleeding into the brain," Tanzi said.

"In contrast, the intensive lifestyle changes implemented in this study have been shown here to improve cognition and function, at a fraction of the cost—and the only side effects are positive ones," he added.

More information: Dean Ornish et al, Effects of intensive lifestyle changes on the progression of mild cognitive impairment or early

dementia due to Alzheimer's disease: a randomized, controlled clinical trial, *Alzheimer's Research & Therapy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s13195-024-01482-z](#)

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