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Can **You** Prevent Alzheimer's Disease?

Research Provides New Leads

Will doing crossword puzzles prevent memory loss as we age? Does exercise delay or prevent Alzheimer's disease? Will adding fish oil to a diet help keep our brains healthy as we age? NIH recently convened a conference to answer these and other questions. The conclusion? Research so far has offered good leads about preventing Alzheimer's disease and age-related cognitive decline. Still, more research is needed before we can be sure what's effective.

Alzheimer's disease usually affects people 60 and older, but people with a rare form of the illness can develop the disease in their 30s or 40s.

While aging brains may not store memories or recall information as easily as they once did, many older people function well despite these changes. In fact, experience can help some older people perform certain tasks as well or better than younger ones. Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are definitely not, as people once thought, a normal part of aging.

Research, Treatment & Prevention

The science of Alzheimer's disease has come a long way since 1906, when a German neurologist and psychiatrist named Dr. Alois Alzheimer first described the key features of the disease now named after him. He noticed abnormal deposits in the brain of a 51-year old woman who had dementia. Researchers now know that Alzheimer's disease is characterized by brain abnormalities called plaques and tangles.

Plaques are clumps of protein in the spaces between the brain's nerve cells. Tangles are masses of twisted protein threads found inside nerve cells. Scientists know what these plaques and tangles are made of. But they still don't know what causes them to form, or how to stop the process.

A handful of approved medications are available to help treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. One, donepezil (Aricept), was found to delay the development of Alzheimer's disease for about a year in people with mild impairment. None of the approved medications, however, appears to affect the underlying causes of the disease.

In a review of observational studies and clinical trials, scientists have been able to identify a few prevention strategies. For example, these studies have suggested that physical activity, social engagement and intellectual activity all may help prevent Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline. Controlling high blood pressure and diabetes may help. So may omega 3 fatty acids, which are found in salmon and other fish. Many of these strategies have already been shown to promote healthy aging and reduce the risk for other diseases.

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WELCOA'S ONLINE SELF-CARE BULLETIN

Can **You** Prevent **Alzheimer's Disease?**

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Alzheimer's Prevention

No studies to date have given conclusive answers when it comes to preventing Alzheimer's or cognitive decline. These strategies and many others are under further study. In addition, many drugs are now being tested in clinical trials.

"We wish we could tell people that taking a pill or doing a puzzle every day would prevent this terrible disease, but current evidence doesn't support this," says Dr. Martha L. Daviglus, panel chair and professor of preventive medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago.

Stick to Healthy Habits

Still, many of the healthy habits under study, like exercise, usually do no harm and likely benefit overall health. Smoking has been linked to a greater risk for dementia and cognitive decline, so if you smoke, try to quit. Chronic diseases, such as diabetes and depression, may also raise your risk, so be sure to address any long-term health problems.

FOR HEALTHY AGING

No treatments or drugs have yet been proven to prevent or delay Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline. But these healthy lifestyle choices and behaviors may help the aging brain:

- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a healthy diet that is rich in fruits and vegetables.
- Engage in social and intellectually stimulating activities.
- Control type 2 diabetes.
- Reduce high blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Don't smoke.
- See a doctor about mental health issues, such as depression.

