



Alzheimer's
Australia
Living with dementia

MIND YOUR MIND TIP SHEET SERIES



Brain health and heart health - what's the connection?

The association between the risk factors for cardiovascular disease and dementia is strong, with a close link between brain health and heart health.

What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease refers to disease of the heart and blood vessels and can include coronary heart disease, atherosclerosis (clogging and narrowing of arteries), deep vein thrombosis (blood clots) and stroke.

Often there are no overt symptoms of cardiovascular disease, and a heart attack or stroke may be the first indication of underlying disease.

To find out more about cardiovascular disease, visit the Heart Foundation's website at heartfoundation.org.au.

What is dementia?

Dementia is the term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses that cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. A broad range of symptoms include loss of memory and changes to intellect, rationality, social skills and emotional reactions.

There are many different forms of dementia and each has its own causes. The most common forms are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

To find out more about dementia, visit the Alzheimer's Australia website at alzheimers.org.au.

What is the link between dementia and heart disease?

Quite simply, the brain needs a healthy heart and healthy blood vessels to provide a good blood supply to keep brain cells functioning well.

Over the years, a growing body of research has found a strong connection between cardiovascular risk factors (such as high blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels) and dementia. Findings have shown that what is good for our heart is also good for our brain. For example, medicines used to help lower high blood pressure may also help to reduce a person's risk of developing coronary heart disease and dementia.

What can I do to reduce my risk of dementia and cardiovascular disease?

Have regular check-ups

All adult Australians from the age of 18 years should have their blood pressure checked regularly and follow their doctor's advice about having their blood cholesterol and blood glucose levels tested.

Generally, it is recommended that all adults aged 45 years and older see their doctor regularly for a heart and stroke risk assessment. Some higher-risk groups should start having heart and stroke risk assessments at a younger age. For example, it is recommended that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people start having these assessments when they are 18 years old.

Take medicines as directed

As well as leading a healthy lifestyle (see below), some people will need to take medicines for the long term to manage their blood pressure, blood cholesterol or blood glucose levels, and to reduce their risk of heart attack, stroke and dementia.

If you have to take medicines, follow your doctor's advice and see him or her regularly to make sure the medicines are working properly. If you have any concerns about side effects, tell your doctor. It is important that you work closely with your doctor to find the medicine (or medicines) that work best for you.

Lead a healthy lifestyle

To help control your risk of developing dementia and cardiovascular disease you should:

- eat healthily
- reduce excess body weight
- be physically active
- be smoke-free
- limit your alcohol intake
- be socially active.



Eat healthily

Healthy eating and drinking is important in looking after your brain and your heart. The *Dietary Guidelines for Australian Adults*¹ recommend that we:

- eat a variety of foods
- include vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, fruit, nuts and seeds every day
- choose healthier fats, lean meat and poultry, and oily fish
- try to limit sugary, fatty and salty take-away meals and snacks
- drink mainly water.

To access the guidelines, visit

nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/publications/synopses/n33.pdf

Reduce excess body weight

The key to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is to enjoy healthy eating and regular physical activity.

To achieve a healthy body weight, balance the energy (kilojoules) coming into your body through food and drinks with the energy (kilojoules) being used up by your body through regular physical activity.

For weight loss to occur, you need to use up more energy (kilojoules) through physical activity and consume less energy (kilojoules) from food and drinks.

Be physically active

Regular, moderate-intensity physical activity is good for your heart and brain, and is a great way to have fun. Being active can also help to control other risk factors, such as high blood pressure and being overweight.

The *National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australian Adults*² recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activities on most, preferably all, days. The amount of activity can be accumulated by combining a few shorter sessions of activity of around 10 to 15 minutes each.

To access the guidelines, visit

health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/phd-physical-activity-adults-pdf-cnt.htm

Be smoke-free

Smoking is the leading preventable cause of death and disease in Australia. It is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease and dementia, as well as a range of cancers and other diseases.

The toxins in tobacco smoke can harm nearly every organ and system of the body, including the heart and brain.

To get help to quit smoking, call Quitline on 131 848 or visit quitnow.info.au.

Limit alcohol intake

Drinking too much alcohol can damage your heart and brain.

If you wish to drink alcohol, follow the Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol³ by consuming no more than two standard drinks per day.

To access the guidelines visit

nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/ds10syn.htm

Be socially active

Taking part in social activities helps to increase your brain and heart health.

Social activities can be as simple as visiting family and friends or joining a walking group or club.

Remember – what is good for your heart is also good for your brain!

This tip sheet
is endorsed by:



¹ National Health and Medical Research Council (2003), *Dietary Guidelines for Australian Adults*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

² Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (1999), *National Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults – An Active Way to Better Health*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra. (Reprinted 2005)

³ National Health and Medical Research Council (2009), *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks From Drinking Alcohol*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

