



# SAVE YOUR BRAIN

## More Information

### Overview

It is estimated that 23% of Americans age 65 and older have 'mild cognitive impairment', or MCI. Mild cognitive impairment is often experienced prior to dementia when individuals begin having difficulty with their memory, but are still able to complete activities such as bathing, dressing, and feeding themselves. Each year, 12% of those with MCI progress to dementia. Dementia is a decrease in brain health that is severe enough to interfere with normal daily activities and independence, and includes Alzheimer's disease. Females are more likely than males to develop cognitive decline.

More than 5 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease – by 2050, this number is expected to rise as high as 16 million. Alzheimer's kills more Americans than breast cancer and prostate cancer combined. In Iowa, Alzheimer's is the 6<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death, and it affected 63,000 people in 2016 and was responsible for 1,339 deaths in 2015.

You can use the lifestyle interventions below to reduce your risk of developing dementia. After age 65, risk of cognitive decline continues to increase the rest of your life – starting good habits now will be helpful down the road!

### Eat Well

Questions 1-15 of the **Save Your Brain Quiz** are based on the MIND diet. This diet is a combination of the Mediterranean and DASH diets with some special additions to help your brain. According to *US News & World Report*, the MIND diet is ranked #1 in easiest diets to follow. The MIND diet is not only brain healthy, but is also heart healthy and can help with weight management. There are 10 'brain healthy' foods - green leafy vegetables, all other vegetables, nuts, berries, beans, whole grains, fish, poultry, olive oil, and wine - and 5 less healthy foods that are limited - red meats, butter and margarine, cheese, pastries/sweets, and fried or fast foods.

Particularly helpful for brain health are green, leafy vegetables and blueberries. You do not have to follow every aspect of the diet - even following it in moderation has been shown to have brain-healthy effects! For example, try to eat green leafy vegetables every day and have a handful of blueberries each week. If you eat red meat or meat products every day of the week, try to substitute some of those meals with chicken or fish.

#### **An example of a detailed MIND diet regimen would look something like this:**

- *Daily:* 3 servings whole grains, salad (not iceberg lettuce) and another vegetable, and drink a glass of wine. Less than 1 tbsp butter
- *Snack:* nuts
- *Every other day:* half a cup of beans
- *Twice a week:* poultry and a half-cup serving of berries (blueberries)
- *Weekly:* Unfried fish and poultry. Less than 5 servings of sweets or pastries of any kind. Less than 1 serving of cheese, fried food, or fast food

This diet is not meant to lose weight (but you may anyway), but is meant to encourage you to eat the foods most likely to help your brain (and heart!).



## Get Moving

It is important to note that physical activity does not have to be 'going to the gym' – it can include anything that gets you off the couch and increases your heart rate. For example, you can walk your dog, garden, or clean the house. A good rule of thumb is that if you're working hard enough that it is more difficult to carry on a conversation because you are breathing hard, you are experiencing beneficial physical activity. This should take place 3 or more days a week, for a total of 30 minutes per day. Being active for 1-2 times per week can help reduce risk of cognitive decline (and have other health benefits, such as decreased weight, decreased risk for heart disease, and increased energy!).

*Note:* Anyone with medical problems, especially heart or lung disease, should see their healthcare provider before starting a new exercise program.

## Strength and Balance

Increasing strength and improving balance are not known to reduce the risk of cognitive decline, but they have been shown to improve overall health. Strength training can range from lifting weights at the gym to using resistance bands, completing body weight exercises such as push-ups or crunches, carrying your laundry around the house, or moving boxes. It is recommended to complete these activities 2 or more times per week. This helps you maintain lean muscles and strong bones to help prevent broken bones like in your hips. Improving balance is a key aspect in preventing falls, a major risk factor for loss of independence in older adults.

30-40% of independent individuals over the age of 65 fall each year, and 50% of individuals 80 and older experience falls that can result in major injuries such as broken bones (i.e. hips), head injury, or serious cuts. Several exercise programs incorporate balance, and even doing something as simple as standing on one foot while brushing your teeth can be beneficial.

*Note:* Before starting a strength program, talk to your healthcare provider. If you are considering starting a weight training program, work with a professional to learn how to use weights and weight machines correctly to ensure prevent injury.

## Sitting

You may have heard the saying 'sitting is the new smoking'. There is concern about how harmful sedentary behavior can be, whether that is sitting while driving, working or lounging on the couch for long periods of time. It is thought that sitting for 2 hours or longer can be harmful to several aspects of your health - it can increase your risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and there is an association with cognitive decline. You should stand up and move every hour.

## Outdoor Activity

The weather in Iowa is not always the most friendly when it comes to outdoor activities, but you may be able to further reduce your risk for cognitive decline by getting out of your apartment or house. This may be for social activities, to go to the grocery store, or to be physically active. For example, when the weather is favorable, get out and walk on Iowa's many sidewalks, gardens, parks and bike paths! When it's not, head to your local mall to walk.

For more information on recommended physical activity, visit this website:

[www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/older\\_adults/](http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/older_adults/).



## Stay Sharp

The more mentally engaged you are, the less your risk of experiencing cognitive decline. However, it is important to make a distinction between passively engaging and actively engaging your mind. For example, rereading a book is not the same as reading a new book that you discuss at a book club.

The following skills have been shown to improve cognitive function. These are in the early stages of research, so the amount of impact on decreasing the risk of cognitive decline has not yet been defined; however, they have shown short-term improvements in cognitive functioning, which make researchers hopeful that long-term they can decrease the risk of cognitive decline.

### Languages

Studies have found that speaking two or more languages can delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease by up to 5 years (there are cultural and situation-specific influences). Learning a second (or third, or fourth) language at any point in life has been linked to decreased risk of cognitive decline.

### Learning a New Skill

Adults who participate in university classes part-time for a year have shown improved cognitive function. Stimulating and challenging your brain by actively engaging in learning may counteract cognitive decline. Other activities, such as learning how to play a musical instrument and gaining new life skills, likely have similar effects - learning new and difficult skills over a period of time in older adulthood can improve memory. Examples include: learning how to play a new musical instrument or learning a new card game with friends. It is important to challenge yourself to enjoy cognitive improvement and protection from cognitive decline.

## Be Social

Those who interact with others often, either face-to-face or on the phone, may have up to a 50% decreased risk of cognitive decline when compared to those who are not socially active. Activities can include interacting with friends and/or family and participating in activities at church, community centers, book clubs, coffee groups, bridge clubs, and many others. Individuals with 5-6 social ties (individuals whom they interact with on a regular basis) are less likely than those with no friends or family to develop cognitive decline.

It is important to interact with others – whether that is your family, friends, caregivers, or groups of individuals – to stimulate your brain. For example, studies have shown that group activities such as therapeutic writing, group exercise, and group art experiences increase brain function after 6 to 12 months. The quality of the social interactions is just as important; for example, talking in passing with the cashier at the store is not the same as having an in depth discussion with a peer or loved one on current events.

### Confidant

Not having a confidant was significantly associated with increased risk of Alzheimer's dementia. This confidant can be anyone – a spouse, a child, another family member, or a friend. Having someone you can talk to about concerns or problems, or someone who is there to support you in a difficult time, is thought to be important because of the strength and quality of the relationship.



## Final Thoughts

Making sure all chronic diseases (like high blood pressure and diabetes) are well controlled has been shown to be important for brain health. Also, having your hearing and vision checked regularly may be critical to maintaining these healthy habits, especially the social activities. Regularly getting a good night of sleep (around 8 hours) helps your brain stay healthy. And if you smoke – quit!

The risk reductions described above often work together to produce their effects, and it is important that you have healthy habits in all areas. The goal of this quiz is to identify areas in your everyday life where you may improve your current and future cognitive health, as well as improve physical health.