

Reducing the risk of Dementia

For families and whānau



Dear Family and Whānau,

As a Memory Service we feel passionate about improving the lives of both our patients and their families-whānau. Therefore, we have created this resource especially for the whānau-family of the person with dementia.

We know that many cases of dementia are preventable by adopting simple lifestyle strategies in our young to middle adult years. Hence, providing this information to you now.

Recent research has suggested that one third (30%) of Alzheimers disease cases world wide can be attributed to 7 modifiable risk factors (Lancet Neurology 2014, Alzheimer's Disease International 2014). Therefore, now is the time to look at these risk factors in your life to reduce your risk of developing dementia in years to come.

Kind regards

The Memory Service Team.

The seven major risk factors for Alzheimer's disease.

These seven major risk factors are:

- diabetes
- midlife hypertension
- midlife obesity
- physical inactivity
- depression
- smoking
- low brain stimulating activities

Have you identified any of these risk factors in yourself? Now is the time to address them! Yes, you can change these factors to reduce the risk of developing dementia in your older years, to improve your quality of life now and in the future.

Many of these risk factors can be tackled by looking at simple lifestyle strategies.

The risk of hypertension, diabetes, depression, midlife obesity can be reduced by looking at diet and exercise.

Diet

This can be very confusing as there are so many different diets claiming to be of benefit for a healthy brain. The simplest way to approach this confusion is to consider universal features. The Mediterranean diet has the most evidence of being of benefit in depression and good brain function. Those individuals who eat a diet high in fruit, vegetables and fish; have been shown to have a reduced risk of both depression and dementia. The reason for these benefits is not clear; from current understanding it's likely due to anti-oxidative properties, anti-inflammatory or metabolic properties.

Put simply; these strategies focus on whole foods. Avoid eating processed food (including white flour, sugar etc). Eating plenty of fruit and vegetables with as many colours of the rainbow as possible, whole grains, nuts, seeds and legumes. Include healthy sources of protein; such as fish (2 servings a week) and less emphasis on dairy or red meat.

In other words, what ever you put in your mouth is feeding your brain; therefore make it count to get the most nutrition out of each mouthful.

Exercise

Many studies have shown that those who are more physically active have a lower risk for dementia. Physical activity is beneficial throughout life, lowers the risk of dementia and impaired brain functions. Exercise helps to prevent depression or a treatment strategy for depression. Exercise is also beneficial for the vascular risk factors, such as hypertension, diabetes and obesity.

Hypertension

Studies have shown that midlife hypertension is a risk factor for dementia. Observational studies have shown that those individuals who take anti-hypertensive medication (lowers blood pressure) and manage their blood pressure well have a lower risk of developing dementia compared to those that don't. Therefore, adopting lifestyle strategies that may reduce the risk of hypertension is a good place to start and taking medications.

Diabetes

Uncontrolled diabetes is a risk factor for dementia; particularly vascular dementia. Lifestyle strategies involving diet and exercise can be used to prevent diabetes and in turn dementia. If you already have diabetes; these strategies are useful together with taking your diabetic medications.

Smoking

The benefits of stopping are major as it reduces the risk of; dementia, ischaemic heart disease, stroke, cancer and many more. If you are smoking contact your General Practitioner, Practice Nurse or Nurse Practitioner about a quit smoking plan.

Midlife Obesity

This is a recognised risk factor for dementia. We acknowledge that obesity is a complex issue for many individuals and is not a straightforward problem. Strategies like a Mediterranean diet, together with exercise can help to a certain extent to reduce your risk of developing dementia.

Depression

There is some uncertainty whether depression is an early symptom of dementia or may cause dementia. There is no doubt that there is an association. Either way lifestyle strategies such as; diet, exercise, sleep and stress management are going to be helpful for mood and general brain health.

Education

Past learning experiences are closely linked to developing a strong and active brain. Our brain likes to be stimulated by varied activities to form useful connections; also known as cognitive reserve. However, it's never too late to start doing brain stimulating activities to improve your cognitive reserve and therefore may reduce the risk of dementia.

Conclusion

In summary, we understand the journey that you are on with your relative with dementia can be very challenging at times, both for you as a family-whānau and for the person with dementia. Being at the coal face, perhaps would bring home to you the importance of prevention so you don't have to follow the same path as your loved one.

Knowledge is power and without being aware of these potential risk factors in ourselves; we have no reason or opportunity to change.

We hope that you will examine your lifestyle, spread the word and make the changes to improve your overall health and therefore the health of your family-whānau and our community as we all age.

Supporting healthy futures.
The Memory Service Team

*The Bay of Plenty District Health Board has an active commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi
and the improvement of Māori health.*

Our Values

CARE
Manakitanga

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