

# Reducing your risk of Dementia





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## Being Dementia Aware

Thank you to ASH Scotland, Drink Wise Age Well and Paths for All for their help with producing the original version of this guide.

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## Reducing your risk of dementia

Currently, there is no cure for dementia, and it cannot be entirely prevented. Some things that increase your risk of dementia, like age or genetics, can't be changed, but there may be steps you can take to lower your risk of getting dementia. Many of the risk factors for dementia are also risk factors for other medical conditions such as heart disease and stroke.

This guide explains some of the risk factors for dementia that you may be able to control.



70%

**higher risk of developing dementia**



## What is dementia?

Dementia is a **set of symptoms** caused by damage to the brain from certain diseases or conditions and once a person has it, it gets progressively worse.

Symptoms can include problems with memory loss, thinking, mental agility, language and understanding.

There are many different types of dementia although some are more common than others. The most common types of dementia are:

- **Alzheimer's disease** causes the loss of brain cells, leading to dementia. It accounts for around two thirds of cases.
- **Vascular dementia** is the second most common cause of dementia. It occurs when the blood supply to the brain is impaired.
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies** accounts for around 10% of cases of dementia. Lewy bodies are tiny deposits of protein that can build up in the cells of the brain and are associated with damage and loss of function.
- **Frontotemporal dementia** is a less common type of dementia. Frontotemporal dementia is caused when nerve cells in the frontal and/or temporal lobes of the brain die, and the pathways that connect the lobes change.
- **Mixed dementia** occurs when people develop more than one form of dementia, such as both Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.



## Smoking

Smoking increases your risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke, and dementia. You can reduce your risk of dementia if you are able to stop smoking or reduce the amount you smoke.

Smoking is thought to increase your risk of dementia because:

- it is very harmful to your heart and blood vessels and what is bad for the heart and circulation is also bad for the brain
- damaged blood vessels can lead to stroke and coronary heart disease, which increase your risk of dementia
- smoking can contribute to the build-up of fatty substances in the blood vessels, causing narrowing of the blood vessels supplying the heart and brain; this stops enough oxygen getting to your brain cells, so they become damaged
- smoking makes your blood much more likely to clot which increases the risk of having a heart attack or stroke
- smoking damages brain cells.

Research suggests that after several years of not smoking, the risk of dementia in former smokers is close to that of people who never smoked.

People who smoke have a much better chance of stopping smoking if they have support. There are many different ways to find support:

- ask your GP for advice
- talk to your pharmacist
- talk to **Quit your way**. Advisers give free information and advice about how to stop smoking, can help you to come up with a plan that's right for you, and tell you what support is available locally. Call freephone **0800 84 84 84** or use their webchat at **[www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/quit-your-way-scotland](http://www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/quit-your-way-scotland)**.



## Alcohol

Very heavy, long-term drinking can cause alcohol-related dementia, and excessive alcohol consumption can cause brain damage that could lead to Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. People who drink heavily or engage in binge-drinking are more likely to develop dementia than those who drink moderately.

The best advice is to follow the NHS guidelines, that both men and women should limit their alcohol intake to 14 units a week and no more than 2-3 units in a day.

### UNITS

A standard glass (175mL) of (12%) wine = 2.1 units

A pint of lower-strength (3.6%) alcohol beer or cider = 2 units

A pint of higher-strength (5.2%) alcohol beer or cider = 3 units

A single shot (25mL) of spirit e.g. whisky, gin or vodka (40%) = 1 unit

In general it is fine to drink the occasional glass of wine or beer, but try to stay within the NHS guidelines and have at least 2 or 3 alcohol free days a week.

As you get older your body is less able to process alcohol, so even drinking slightly more than the recommended limits can have an impact on your health. If you want to drink less, talk to your GP who will be able to offer you help and support or contact one of the specialist services that can help:

**We are with you** (formerly Addaction): provides free, confidential support with alcohol or drugs via a local service or online.

Webchat is available through their website

**[www.wearewithyou.org.uk/help-and-advice/](http://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/help-and-advice/)** or you can chat to someone on **0800 915 4624**.

**Alcoholics Anonymous** provides free self-help groups across Scotland. Its 12-step programme involves getting sober with the help of regular support groups. Call **0800 917 7650**.



## Being active

Being active lowers the risk of Type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer, heart disease and strokes. It is good for your mental health, and may improve your thinking and memory which can lower the risk of developing dementia. A fifth of the Alzheimer's cases worldwide are estimated to be due to lack of physical activity.

Taking part in physical activity is a great way to get out and about and also meet new people. Time spent with other people may reduce loneliness and isolation, which could be risk factors for memory and thinking problems.

If you want to be more active, find an activity you enjoy so you will be more likely to stick to it. Becoming more active does not have to be difficult and simple changes to your routine can make a big difference. You could:

- walk up the stairs instead of using lifts or escalators
- get off the bus a couple of stops early
- when walking, choose a longer or hilly route
- park further away from shops and walk the extra distance
- stand up whilst talking on the phone.

Older adults who safely can, should aim to be active daily. The recommended level is 150 minutes a week of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes a week of vigorous physical activity.





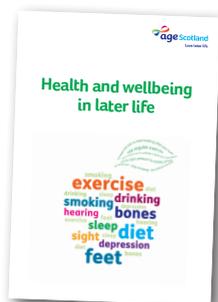
**Moderate physical activity** should make you feel warmer and get your heart beating faster, but you should still be able to talk. Brisk walking is a great activity for people of all ages and fitness levels. It is simple, free and you don't need any special equipment.

**Vigorous physical activity** should make you breathe hard and fast and raise your heart rate significantly. Vigorous activity can include jogging, running, fast swimming, football, tennis and aerobics.

**Strength and balance** are important too. You should also try and do activities that strengthen your muscles at least twice a week. Examples include carrying heavy shopping bags, lifting weights and digging the garden.

**Don't sit still** - however active you are, you should break up long periods of sitting still by either standing up or moving about. If you break up periods of sitting still with gentle activity (walking slowly, doing some dusting around the house, or some light gardening) this can improve your overall health.

**If you have limited mobility** and are at risk of falls you can benefit from activities that improve balance and co-ordination. Examples include yoga, pilates, tai chi and seated exercises such as marching, bending legs, waving arms and stretches. You should also aim to stand up from sitting at least once every hour. If you use a wheelchair some light seated exercises are a great way to break up long periods of sitting still.



For more information about staying active see our guide to **Health and wellbeing in later life** and our falls prevention guide **Up and About**.



## Diet and weight

Adopting a healthy diet can help to keep cholesterol, blood pressure and weight down and help prevent the development of type 2 diabetes. These are all separate risk factors for dementia.

People who eat a Mediterranean diet may have a lower risk of developing memory and thinking problems. A Mediterranean diet includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and starchy foods like bread and pasta, along with some fish and less meat.

In general, it is better for you to eat fewer foods that are high in saturated fat, such as processed meats, butter and cakes and instead eat foods containing unsaturated fats such as oily fish, nuts and seeds. Ready meals and sauces are often high in added sugar.

The Eat Well plate shows how your diet should balance out:





Being either underweight or overweight may be risk factors for dementia. If you are concerned about your weight speak to your GP to see if changes to your diet or exercise could help you to be the right weight for you.

Research suggests that the best way to lose weight is to make long-term changes to diet and exercise levels that result in a steady rate of weight loss.

If you need to gain weight, perhaps because of illness, loss of appetite or skipping meals, you could try eating smaller meals, and regular healthy snacks. Regular exercise could help you feel hungrier and improve your appetite.

As you get older your appetite can change and it can become harder to maintain a healthy diet. For advice about eating healthily see Age Scotland's guide **Eat Well** or talk to your GP.



## Blood Pressure

High blood pressure in mid-life can increase your risk of developing dementia, particularly vascular dementia, so if you are 40 or over get your blood pressure checked regularly by your GP. A healthy blood pressure should be around 120/80mmHg.

Exercising, eating healthily, maintaining a healthy weight, not drinking too much and not smoking all help to maintain a healthy blood pressure.

If you do have high blood pressure, your doctor may advise you to make changes to your diet or exercise, or prescribe medicine.

**Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland** have advice line nurses you can speak to about blood pressure. Call **0808 8010899** or see their website **[www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)**.



## Useful Contacts

### Age Scotland helpline 0800 12 44 222

The Age Scotland helpline provides information, friendship and advice to older people, their relatives and carers.

If you need an interpreter call **0800 12 44 222** and simply state the language you need e.g. Polish or Urdu. Stay on the line for a few minutes and the Age Scotland helpline will do the rest.

Age Scotland produces a range of information guides about rights and issues in later life. You can call us on **0800 12 44 222** for a copy of our publications list or download copies from our website at **[www.agescotland.org.uk](http://www.agescotland.org.uk)**.

### Alzheimer Scotland

Alzheimer Scotland is the leading dementia organisation in Scotland. It campaigns for the rights of people with dementia and their families and provides an extensive range of innovative and personalised support services. Freephone 24 Hour Dementia

Helpline: **0808 808 3000**

Email: **[info@alzscot.org](mailto:info@alzscot.org)**

**[www.alzscot.org](http://www.alzscot.org)**

### NHS Inform

NHS Inform provides information about illnesses and conditions, symptoms tests and treatments, health rights and where to get help.

Tel: **0800 22 44 88** / **[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)**

**Age Scotland is the national charity for older people. We work to improve the lives of everyone over the age of 50 so that they can love later life.**

**Our vision is a Scotland where everyone can love later life.**

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LOTTERY FUNDED



We are grateful to the Scottish Government for part-funding this publication

