

Fighting Against Dementia

Joni Orazio, MD, DFAPA

Dementia for far too many people is a very real and challenging illness that is proving to be one of our biggest global medical challenges with regards to treatment and societal cost.

Science is teaching us that we can defend ourselves against dementia to some degree. We cannot correct genetic predisposition, but we can address lifestyle issues. Certain risk factors are associated with acquiring dementia:

- Substance and alcohol abuse
- Untreated depression and anxiety
- Diets filled with sugar, processed foods, artificial sweeteners and unhealthy fats
- Obesity
- Heart disease
- Prediabetes and diabetes
- Untreated Sleep apnea
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Periodontal disease

Interventions that can provide probable defense against declining cognition are easily attainable.

Diet: Diets low in refined carbohydrates and high in antioxidants, anti-inflammatory foods and omega three fatty acids are recommended. Consistent intake of berries, vegetables, deep water fish, nuts, seeds, avocados, lean protein, whole grains, beans, brewed tea and dark chocolate are advisable. Following a Mediterranean diet achieves this balance and reduces heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

Alcohol: Moderation is the key to alcohol use with red wine, one glass per day, being shown to have brain protective qualities. Other forms of alcohol may offer protection, but consuming beyond the recommended amount becomes a risk factor.

Exercise: Moderate exercise is beneficial to every aspect of our health, keeping our weight, emotions, and hearts in check. It also increases blood flow to the brain.

Tobacco: Smoking is a known offender in causing damage to all organs in our bodies, predominantly our brain, heart, and lungs. It is presumed smoking accelerates the aging of cells.

Live Well: Enjoying life and creating a social circle of friends and family that love and support us reduces the risk of social isolation, alienation, and depression, which are known factors in increasing the risk of cognitive decline. There is data suggesting reducing anxiety may help prevent cognitive decline. Meditation is an excellent tool to achieve this.

Sleep: We are becoming increasingly certain that poor sleep contributes to an illness state. Sleep provides the brain the opportunity to repair itself and flush toxins out of the brain that build up during waking hours.

Cognitive Stimulating Activities: Staying cognitively engaged is considered paramount to preventing cognitive decline. Computer games, learning new information, reading, and stimulating

conversations are great options to enhance neural activity.

Although no one single intervention is yet known to prevent dementia, certainly implementing the above lifestyle suggestions has the possibility of helping to prevent cognitive decline, and enhance health and wellness.