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20 Actions You Can Take to Drastically Decrease Your Chances of Developing Dementia

(Based on the 2024 report from The Lancet Commission and additional current research gathered by LeAnn Nickelsen, M.Ed.)

Dementia is one of the world's fastest-growing health challenges. According to the World Health Organization (2024), more than 55 million people currently live with dementia, and nearly 10 million new cases are diagnosed each year. By 2050, this number is projected to reach 153 million (GBD 2019 Dementia Forecasting Collaborators, 2022). Alzheimer's disease alone affects approximately one in nine adults aged 65 and older.

The National Institute on Aging (2023) defines dementia as the loss of cognitive functioning, such as thinking, remembering, and reasoning, to the extent that it interferes with daily life. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause, characterized by the accumulation of amyloid plaques and tau tangles in the brain.

The potential for prevention of dementia is high, and overall, nearly half of the dementias could theoretically be prevented by eliminating these 14 risk factors, according to The 2024 Lancet Commission.

1. Enhance Cognitive Opportunities Through Learning

You've likely heard the phrase "use it or lose it." Cognitive engagement strengthens neural connections and builds what scientists call *cognitive reserve*—the brain's ability to adapt and maintain function as it ages.

Psychologists Linda Clare and Robert Woods identified three forms of mental stimulation: cognitive stimulation (e.g., discussions, puzzles, strategy games), cognitive rehabilitation (targeted interventions to restore function), and cognitive training (focused exercises that enhance attention and problem solving). Opposite behaviors, such as excessive television watching or mindless scrolling, can accelerate cognitive decline (Mullany et al., 2018).

Take Action: Read books, learn a language, play a new instrument, take classes, or challenge yourself with new hobbies and games.

2. Treat Hearing Loss Early

Hearing impairment has been linked to a higher risk of dementia (Wei et al., 2017). People who use hearing aids to address hearing loss show a significantly lower incidence of cognitive decline (Alzheimer's Society, 2024).

Take Action: Schedule regular hearing screenings, use hearing aids if recommended, and protect your ears from loud environments.

3. Decrease LDL ("Bad") Cholesterol

By changing your diet, you can significantly reduce your risk of dementia. A recent study suggested that lowering LDL cholesterol is associated with an 82% lower risk of dementia (Nordestgaard et al., 2025). Excess cholesterol can harm the brain by clogging arteries, causing inflammation, and reducing blood flow. High saturated and trans fats have been associated with increased dementia risk, while monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats appear protective (Morris & Tangney, 2014).

Type of Fat	Pros / Health Effects	Cons / Health Effects	Common Examples (Foods)
Trans Fats	• None; not essential for health. • Sometimes increase shelf life of foods.	• Raises LDL ("bad") cholesterol. • Lowers HDL ("good") cholesterol. • Increases risk of heart disease, stroke, and inflammation.	• Processed baked goods (cakes, cookies, pastries). • Fried fast foods. • Margarine or shortening (partially hydrogenated oils).
Saturated Fats	• Provides energy and structure for cell membranes. • Naturally occurring in many whole foods.	• Excess intake can raise LDL cholesterol. • May increase risk of heart disease if consumed in large amounts.	• Butter, cheese, cream. • Fatty meats (beef, pork, lamb). • Coconut oil, palm oil.
Monounsaturated Fats (MUFA)	• Improves blood cholesterol (lowers LDL, maintains HDL). • Supports heart health. • May reduce inflammation.	• High in calories; excessive intake can still lead to weight gain.	• Olive oil, canola oil. • Avocados. • Nuts (almonds, peanuts, cashews).
Polyunsaturated Fats (PUFA)	• Provides essential omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. • Lowers LDL cholesterol. • Supports brain and cell function.	• Omega-6 in excess (without enough omega-3) may promote inflammation.	• Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, sardines). • Walnuts, flaxseeds, chia seeds. • Soybean, sunflower, and corn oils.

Take Action: Eat more foods rich in healthy fats (like extra virgin olive oil, avocados, nuts, and seeds) and limit fried or heavily processed foods (Weidner et al., 2024). Eggs are also beneficial, as their choline content supports acetylcholine production, a neurotransmitter essential for memory (Davies, 1999). Choose pasture-raised or grass-fed eggs for higher nutrient value.

4. Address Depression Promptly

Long-term depression can shrink the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex (regions crucial for memory and emotion regulation) and may double the risk of developing dementia (Elser et al., 2023).

Take Action: Seek professional treatment, explore Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and try expressive writing, which has been shown to improve mood and cognition (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

5. Prevent Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

A single head injury can trigger inflammation and neuronal damage, increasing dementia risk later in life. Chronic inflammation after TBI is associated with protein misfolding, one of the hallmarks of Alzheimer's disease.

Take Action: Use helmets when biking or skiing, install grab bars, remove tripping hazards, wear seatbelts, and maintain strength and balance through regular exercise.

6. Stay Physically Active

Exercise is consistently cited as the most powerful tool for preserving brain health (Attia, 2023). Aerobic, resistance, and multicomponent exercises all lower the risk of dementia. Recent meta-analyses confirm that regular physical activity enhances memory, improves blood flow, and increases brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that supports neuron growth (Zhao et al., 2024; Szuhany et al., 2015).

New research suggests that combining cardio and strength training is the most effective way to protect brain health and improve memory after 60. Aerobic exercise increases blood flow and neuroplasticity while resistance training boosts brain-supporting hormones like BDNF (Han, Zhang et al, 2025).

Take Action: Incorporate cardio, strength, and flexibility exercises into your weekly routine.

7. Reduce Isolation—Stay Social

Social isolation increases the risk of chronic disease and mortality as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes per day (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Frequent social interaction protects cognitive health by reducing stress and stimulating emotional engagement.

Take Action: Join clubs, volunteer, attend classes, invite friends for meals, and stay connected with loved ones.

8. Prevent or Treat Diabetes

High blood sugar can damage blood vessels in the brain and, over time, reduce cognitive function. Controlling diabetes significantly lowers dementia risk.

Take Action: Monitor glucose levels, maintain a balanced diet, and follow your doctor's recommendations for diabetes management.

9. Quit Smoking

Smoking increases oxidative stress, inflammation, and vascular damage, all of which contribute to cognitive decline.

Take Action: Seek cessation programs or nicotine replacement therapies to protect both brain and heart health.

10. Control Hypertension and Manage Stress

Chronic high blood pressure and stress raise cortisol levels, impairing brain function and memory formation.

Take Action: Monitor blood pressure, practice relaxation techniques, and engage in stress-reducing activities such as yoga or mindfulness.

11. Maintain a Healthy Weight

Excess weight is associated with insulin resistance and inflammation, both linked to dementia risk.

Take Action: Combine balanced nutrition with consistent exercise to sustain a healthy body mass index (BMI).

12. Limit Alcohol Consumption

Heavy drinking damages brain tissue and disrupts neural communication.

Take Action: Drink moderately. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggest no more than one alcoholic beverage per day for women and two for men (2020-2025).

13. Reduce Air Pollution Exposure

Airborne pollutants have been linked to neuroinflammation and oxidative stress, contributing to cognitive decline (Livingston et al., 2024).

Take Action: Use air purifiers indoors and limit outdoor activity when pollution levels are high.

14. Treat Vision Loss

Maintaining eye health helps preserve neural pathways and overall cognitive function.

Take Action: Schedule annual eye exams and address vision issues promptly.

You now have the 2024 *Lancet Commission* list of the 14 modifiable risk factors that, when managed together, can lower your chances of developing dementia by as much as 45%. LeAnn would like to add 6 more suggestions based on her research and experiences with her mom in Memory Care.

15. Follow the MIND Diet

The MIND diet, which combines elements of the Mediterranean and DASH diets (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension), emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, and fish (along with other lean proteins). A 2025 meta-analysis found that adherence to this diet significantly reduced the risk of cognitive impairment and dementia (Fekete et al., 2025).

16. Cultivate Laughter

Frequent laughter has been associated with a lower risk of dementia (Iso et al., 2022). Humor reduces stress and supports emotional and cognitive resilience.

Take Action: Engage with people or media that make you laugh daily.

17. Nurture Spiritual and Emotional Well-Being

A systematic review of 17 studies found that 82% reported positive associations between spirituality and cognitive health (Hosseini et al., 2019). Belief in a higher power or engaging in purposeful living fosters psychological resilience.

Take Action: Practice gratitude, meditation, or prayer - whatever supports your sense of meaning.

18. Challenge Working Memory

Mentally demanding activities like solving puzzles, playing strategic games, or learning new skills help maintain working memory and cognitive flexibility.

Take Action: Engage regularly in tasks that stretch your focus and recall abilities. *This topic will be the next newsletter – stay tuned! So many good strategies and tools to build capacity and strengthen working memory.*

19. Limit Excessive Screen Time

Watching television for more than 3–5 hours a day has been linked to a higher risk of dementia (Zhuang et al., 2023). Interactive screen activities, such as learning or creative projects, are more beneficial.

Take Action: Replace passive viewing with mentally or socially active alternatives.

20. Prioritize Lifelong Learning

Continuing education fosters cognitive resilience. Lifelong learning through professional development, mentoring, or creative pursuits builds new neural pathways and maintains cognitive reserve (Livingston et al., 2024).

Take Action: Keep learning professionally and personally throughout life.

Bonus: Supplements *(Thank you to Dr. Eric Jensen for his recommendations to this section)*

Several supplements have published studies showing potential to reduce the risk of dementia or slow cognitive decline. The evidence for some is stronger or more consistent than for others, and many studies note the need for further research. WARNING… Supplements can interact adversely with medications and other supplements. Always get your doctor's advice before taking any supplements.

1. **Creatine**: Supplementation (20 grams divided into 2 doses) was associated with improved cognitive function and increased brain creatine levels. They found the following medium-to-large effect sizes: overall cognitive ability, mental flexibility and problem-solving, working memory, oral reading recognition, and inhibitory control and attention. The research is promising but preliminary. *Smith, A. N., Choi, I.-Y., Lee, P., Sullivan, D. K., Burns, J. M., Swerdlow, R. H., Kelly, E., & Taylor, M. K. (2025).* Creatine monohydrate pilot in Alzheimer's: Feasibility, brain creatine, and cognition. *Alzheimer's & Dementia: Translational Research & Clinical Interventions, 11, e70101.* https://doi.org/10.1002/trc2.70101

2. **Vitamin D:** Supplementation has been associated with a reduced risk of developing dementia. A large 10-year study found that older adults taking vitamin D were about 40% less likely to develop dementia compared to those who did not supplement, regardless of the form of vitamin D used. *Maryam Ghahremani, Eric E. Smith, Hung-Yu Chen, et al: "Vitamin D supplementation and incident dementia: Effects of sex, APOE, and baseline cognitive status." Alzheimer's & Dementia: Diagnosis, Assessment & Disease Monitoring, March 1, 2023.*

3. **Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** Reviews and meta-analyses have shown omega-3 fatty acids to be effective in slowing cognitive decline and reducing the risk of dementia. These benefits are linked to their anti-inflammatory properties and support brain health. *Wei BZ, Li L, Dong CW, Tan CC; Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative; Xu W. The Relationship of Omega-3 Fatty Acids with Dementia and Cognitive Decline: Evidence from Prospective Cohort Studies of Supplementation, Dietary Intake, and Blood Markers. Am J Clin Nutr. 2023 Jun;117(6):1096-1109.*

4. **Vitamin E:** High intake of vitamin E (from diet or supplements) is associated with a significant reduction in the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Meta-analyses report about a 21% lower risk for all-cause dementia and a similar reduction for Alzheimer's specifically. *Zhao R, Han X, Zhang H, Liu J, Zhang M, Zhao W, Jiang S, Li R, Cai H, You H. Association of vitamin E intake in diet and supplements with risk of dementia: A meta-analysis. Front Aging Neurosci. 2022 Aug 1;14:955878.*

5. **Vitamin B12 and Folic Acid:** Supplementation with vitamin B complex, especially folic acid and vitamin B12, may help delay or prevent cognitive decline. These vitamins are thought to reduce homocysteine levels, which are linked to an increased risk of dementia. *Wang Z, Zhu W, Xing Y, Jia J, Tang Y. B vitamins and prevention of cognitive decline and incident dementia: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Nutr Rev. 2022 Mar 10;80(4):931-949*

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