



The 10 warning signs of dementia

Whether you're concerned for yourself or someone you care about, it's important to know the warning signs of dementia so you can ensure an early diagnosis. Here are 10 of the most common warning signs for dementia.

Sign 1:

Memory changes that affect day-to-day abilities

Are you, or the person you know, forgetting things often or struggling to retain new information? It's normal to occasionally forget appointments, colleagues' names or a friend's phone number only to remember them a short while later. However, a person living with dementia may forget things more often or may have difficulty recalling information that has recently been learned.

Sign 2:

Difficulty doing familiar tasks

Are you, or the person you know, forgetting how to do a typical routine or task, such as preparing a meal or getting dressed?

Busy people can be so distracted from time to time that they may forget to serve part of a meal, only to remember about it later. However, a person living with dementia may have trouble completing tasks that have been familiar to them all their lives, such as preparing a meal or playing a game.

Sign 3:

Changes in language and communication

Are you, or the person you know, forgetting words or substituting words that don't fit into a conversation?

Anyone can have trouble finding the right word to express what they want to say. However, a person living with dementia may forget simple words or may substitute words making that person hard to understand.

Sign 4:

Disorientation in time and place

Are you, or the person you know, having problems knowing what day of the week it is or getting lost in a familiar place?

Have you ever forgotten what day of the week it is or can't remember why you went into your bedroom? It happens to all of us. However, people living with dementia can become lost on their own street, not knowing how they got there or how to get home.

Sign 5:

Impaired judgment

Are you, or the person you know, not recognizing something that can put health and safety at risk?

From time to time, people may make bad decisions such as putting off seeing a doctor when they are not feeling well. However, a person living with dementia may experience changes in judgment or decision-making, such as not recognizing a medical problem that needs attention or wearing heavy clothing on a hot day.

Sign 6:

Problems with abstract thinking

Are you, or the person you know, having problems understanding what numbers and symbols mean?

From time to time, people may have difficulty with tasks that require abstract thinking, such as managing finances. However, someone living with dementia may have challenges understanding what numbers are and how they are used.

Sign 7:

Misplacing things

Are you, or the person you know, putting things in places where they shouldn't be?

Anyone can temporarily misplace a wallet or keys. However, a person living with dementia may put things in inappropriate places. For example, an iron in the freezer, or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.

Sign 8:

Changes in mood, personality and behaviour

Are you, or the person you know, exhibiting severe changes in mood?

Sometimes people feel sad and moody, or experience changes in their behaviour. But a person living with dementia may experience more severe changes. For example, they may quickly become tearful or upset for no obvious reason. They may be confused, fearful, suspicious and withdraw from others. They may act differently from what is normal for them.

Evidence-based tips and strategies to help you lead a healthy, balanced lifestyle that reduces your risk of dementia.

Sign 9:

Loss of initiative

Are you, or the person you know, losing interest in friends, family and favourite activities?

It's normal to lose interest in housework, business activities or social obligations, but most people regain their initiative. However, a person living with dementia may become passive and disinterested. They may need cues and prompts to become involved.

Sign 10:

Challenges understanding visual and spatial information

Are you or someone you know having problems seeing things correctly? Or coordinating visual and spatial information?

A person with dementia may have problems with vision, depth perception and movement. They may have challenges with finding their way around their environment, or placing things easily and correctly on a table, such as a pencil or mug. Sometimes dementia can be the cause of these issues, and it's important to see a doctor and an eye specialist to get everything checked out.

If you are concerned about any of these signs, talk to your doctor. Only a qualified health-care provider, after multiple assessments and tests, can confirm whether you or someone you know has dementia.

Disclaimer: Not all symptoms for each type of dementia are listed on this page—just the most common ones. They are based on signs outlined by Alzheimer's Disease International. Visit the Alzheimer's Disease International website to see these steps outlined in Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, Chinese and other languages.



Brain-healthy tips to reduce your risk of dementia

Why brain health is so important

While there are some risk factors you cannot control for dementia, such as age and genetics, reducing the effects of risk factors that can be controlled is possible.

By following these tips and strategies, you're not only reducing your risk of dementia, you're also:

- looking after your long-term brain health,
- reducing your risk of other cognitive and chronic diseases, and
- protecting your overall health.

Be physically active

People who exercise regularly are less likely to develop heart disease, stroke and diabetes – all risks associated with dementia.

Physical activity also pumps blood to the brain, which nourishes the cells with nutrients and oxygen. As well, regular exercise helps to reduce stress and improve your mood.

Being physically active can reduce these risk factors for dementia:

- Depression
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Lack of physical activity

Five tips for being physically active

1. Start where you can and set reasonable goals. If you feel you have little opportunity to exercise, start by adding a bit of physical activity into your daily routine. Choose a brisk walk or roll to the store rather than driving the car, or take the stairs instead of the escalator or elevator for one or two floors.
2. Think of it as "activity", not "exercise." Choose activities and sports that you enjoy, and physical activity won't seem like a chore or task to tick off.
3. Once you get going, aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week. Moderate activities could be walking a dog or going for a bicycle ride, while vigorous activities include swimming or going for a run. If you have reduced mobility, try activities that can help you maintain your balance and prevent falls, such as gentle yoga or tai chi.
4. Consider aerobic activities. Aerobic activities, such as walking, swimming, hiking and dancing, can help maintain general fitness. Many experts recommend walking as one of the safest and most effective forms of aerobic exercise.
5. Plan out your physical activity with someone you know. That way, you are more likely to keep active while you also gain the brain-healthy benefits of social interaction.

Be socially active

Staying connected socially helps you stay connected mentally. Research shows that regularly interacting with others may help reduce your risk of developing dementia.

Having an active social life also can reduce your stress, brighten your mood and keep your relationships strong.

Being socially active can reduce these risk factors for dementia

- Depression
- Social isolation

Five tips for being socially active

1. **Make the most of your daily opportunities to socialize.** Chat with your taxi driver or store clerk; make conversation in the elevator.
2. **Practice a random act of kindness.** It could be as small as smiling at someone else passing by – paying your happiness forward will not only brighten someone else's day, but yours as well!
3. **Find time to volunteer.** Whether it's participating in service clubs or joining a hobby group, you'll find that there are many healthy benefits to volunteering. It can build self-esteem and confidence, and it can expand your network of social support.
4. **Combine social interaction with an activity.** It could be a physical activity like walking together or a fitness class, or it could be something like a book club or a play. Ask someone to try a brain-challenging game together. Enjoy yourself while you positively impact your brain health.
5. **Maintain old friendships and make new ones.** Stay social through work, volunteer activities, travel, hobbies, family and friends. Be open to new experiences – accept invitations and extend a few of your own. Keep up your old and new friendships through talking on the phone, chatting online via email or social media, or even writing a letter.

Follow a healthy diet that you enjoy

We know that healthy eating can reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes. These conditions are risk factors for dementia.

Healthy dietary choices not only improve your general health, in the long-term nutritious food helps maintain brain function and fight cognitive decline.

Eating healthily can reduce these risk factors for dementia:

- Diabetes
- High alcohol consumption
- High cholesterol

Five tips for eating healthily

1. **Consider reducing processed foods, meat and sweets.** The Mediterranean and MIND diets—the diets most studied so far by major research organizations around dementia—recommend limiting processed foods, meat, sweets and dairy. Instead, those diets emphasize eating more fruit, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, olive oil and fish. Many other cultures and regions, of course, also have vegetable-, legume-, nut- and fish-focused diets whose principles could apply.
2. **Enjoy a variety of foods in many different colours:**
 - o **Blue and purple** fruits and vegetables tend to be packed with anti-oxidants. Blackberries, blueberries, ube, purple cabbage and plums are all great food choices.
 - o Go **green** every day with fruits and vegetables that are good for your brain and also benefit bones, teeth and vision. Green options include avocados, broccoli, celery, cucumbers, peas, spinach, nori, edamame, pears, honeydew melon and many more.
 - o Choose **white, tan and brown** fruits and vegetables such as bananas, cauliflower, potatoes, turnips, daikon, onions and garlic.
 - o Add **orange and yellow** fruits and vegetables such as grapefruit, cantaloupe, butternut squash, peaches, papaya, oranges, sweet potatoes, yellow peppers and lemons to your plate.
 - o Reach for **reds** every day. Beets, raspberries, red grapes, radishes, tomatoes, red peppers, watermelon, rhubarb, pomegranates and cherries are just a few excellent red choices.
3. **Find healthy ways to add flavour to your meals.** A healthy diet can be tasty! Herbs, spices, nuts and seeds are all healthy add-on options.
4. **Be mindful of your eating habits.** Choose appropriate portion sizes, eat healthy snacks and drink plenty of water – Canada's Food Guide recommends that you make water your drink of choice.
5. **Plan meals in advance.** By developing healthy eating patterns, you don't leave your diet to chance. There are meal planning apps and websites that can help you plan ahead, cook your own food and decide what recipes work best even if you have a busy schedule.

Make conscious and safe choices

"Better to be safe than sorry!" "All things in moderation."

These common sayings have more relevancy than ever when it comes to making the right choices for your brain health! Our ability to maintain life-long brain health is very much influenced by the choices we make in our daily lives.

Research has found that, next to aging (and in some cases, genetics), lifestyle and environmental factors are the most influential factors in determining one's risk for dementia.

Therefore, it's important to protect your body, at any age, for lifelong brain health. Make safe choices that protect you from ailments and trauma that would otherwise increase your risk of dementia.

Making conscious and safe choices can reduce these risk factors for dementia:

- Head injuries
- Hearing loss
- High alcohol consumption
- Smoking

Five tips for making conscious and safe choices

1. **Avoid habits that harm your body.** Examples of harmful habits include smoking, listening to music too loudly and excessive drinking. They might be fun in the short-term, but not in the long run!
2. **Protect your head.** Wear a helmet if you're engaging in intense physical activity like skating, skiing, skateboarding, scootering, rollerblading or cycling. Set a good example and ensure that children in your care wear appropriate helmets too.
3. **Assess the safety of the environment around you.** Do you work or live in an area where you are continually exposed to risks such as loud sounds or vehicle pollution? Does your home have handrails or grab bars installed that improve accessibility and prevent falls? By being aware of potential dangers in your environment, you can take steps to counter them.
4. **Track your numbers.** Doing so will make it easier for you to keep your blood pressure, cholesterol, weight and blood sugar levels within recommended ranges. After all, all of these conditions increase your risk for dementia.
5. **See your doctor regularly.** This will help you address specific health concerns you may have, including diet, hearing evaluations and physical activity.

Manage stress

Experiencing stress is a part of everyday life, but when it persists over time, it can cause vascular changes and chemical imbalances that are damaging to the brain and other cells in your body. By managing or lowering your stress, you can improve your brain health and reduce your risk of dementia.

Managing your stress can reduce these risk factors for dementia:

- Depression
- High blood pressure

Five tips for managing stress

1. **Recognize the symptoms of chronic stress:**
 - o **Emotional:** Depression, tension, anxiety, anger, worry and/or fear.
 - o **Physical:** Headaches, fatigue, insomnia and/or sweating.
 - o **Mental:** Poor concentration, memory loss, indecisiveness and/or confusion.
 - o **Behavioural:** Fidgeting, overeating, alcohol and/or drug abuse.
2. **Take personal time for yourself.** Exercise, relaxation, entertainment, hobbies and socializing are essential parts of our health and well-being. Everyone needs to find a balance that limits stress and helps maintain optimal health. Methods could be through meditation, deep breathing, massage or physical exercise – the key is to explore a variety of techniques and find those that work for you.
3. **Set realistic expectations.** We often assume our expectations are reasonable, but this isn't always the case. By identifying what you can change and what cannot be changed, you can single out unrealistic expectations. Then, you can focus on what can benefit yourself right away.
4. **Get plenty of sleep.** Most people need at least seven hours of sleep per night. Sleep deprivation can significantly impair your memory, mood and function.
5. **Seek and accept support.** Reach out to a friend or family member that you trust. Talk about what's giving you stress. If symptoms of stress persist, contact your doctor.

Challenge your brain

A 2020 University of California study showed that maintaining an overall healthy lifestyle—one that includes cognitive and physical activity, a high-quality diet and social engagement—can reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.

Some people living with dementia have also reported that challenging their brain helps them live well and manage their daily activities such as finances, cooking or being active.

Five tips for challenging your brain

1. **Pursue life-long learning.** Learn new things and take up new hobbies.
2. **Play games.** Examples of brain-challenging games can include chess, tabletop games, video games, word and number puzzles, jigsaws, crosswords, sudoku and memory games. For games on your computer, your tablet or your phone, find games where you can play and interact with other people.
3. **Maintain a routine and use reminders.** Maintain a routine and continue to take part in activities you always love to do (when possible). Use reminders and other tips and strategies when completing daily activities.
4. **Engage in cultural activities.** Check out what's happening in your area, like a community celebration, music event, or art show. After the event, discuss what you saw with a friend.
5. **Cross-train your brain.** What's something you're not good at doing? Work to improve it and give your brain some flexibility. Try a variety of challenges instead of sticking to one particular area. Some people living with dementia try to use their non-dominant hand for everyday activities like brushing teeth.

More useful resources

Being active. The Public Health Agency of Canada. This guide is designed to help Canadians improve their health, prevent disease and get the most out of life.

BrainFit. Women's Brain Health Initiative. A mobile application designed to track habits and help optimize brain health.

Brain health food guide: An evidence-based approach to healthy eating for the aging brain. Baycrest, 2017. This downloadable food guide provides more evidence-based tips for healthy eating, and was written in collaboration with nutritionists involved with the [Canadian Consortium on Neurodegeneration in Aging \(CCNA\)](#).

Canada's food guide. Government of Canada. Recently updated in 2019, Canada's food guide lists recommendations for healthy food choices, eating habits, recipes, tips and other resources.

Dementia-Inclusive Choices for Exercise (DICE). DICE project team. For people living with dementia, family and friends. Resources to help increase knowledge and confidence regarding exercise.

DREAM. DREAM project team. Resources to help people living with dementia and family and friend care partners learn more about physical activity, healthy eating, and wellbeing. Heads up for healthier brains. Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2015. Are you wondering what you can do to keep your brain healthy and reduce your risk of dementia? This handy, downloadable brochure tells you everything you need to know about the relationship between brain health and dementia.

Risk factors. Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2021.

Safe: Senior Adult Fitness Exercises. McGill University Health Centre. A series of free exercise videos created to improve the quality of life of older adults.

What can you do to keep your brain healthy? Trinity Brain Health, 2017. This short, three minute animated film shows you some activities you can do to maintain your brain health.