

Viva!

H E A L T H

FEEDING YOU THE FACTS

DEMENTIA & DIET

Our brains use more than a fifth of our daily energy intake. In the UK, one in 14 people over the age of 65 has dementia and it increases to one in six in people over 80. However, 40 per cent of cases could be prevented or delayed and evidence shows a healthy diet can help.

Dementia is not a single disease but a collection of symptoms resulting from damage to the brain. The most common form is Alzheimer's disease but there are others and it can also result from brain injuries or stroke. Changes within the brain may occur years, or even decades, before symptoms start – they include memory loss and problems with reasoning, communicating and the ability to carry out everyday tasks.



RISK FACTORS

Genetics, obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and heart disease all increase the risk of dementia. We can't do anything about our genes but we can reduce the other risk factors with lifestyle and dietary changes.

- Obesity in midlife increases the risk – especially for those who store fat on their tummy. Vegans tend to weigh less than meat-eaters and gain less weight as they age.
- Diabetes increases the risk of all types of dementia. Around 90 per cent of people with diabetes have type 2. A vegan diet reduces the risk of type 2 by up to 50 per cent and can reverse it.
- High cholesterol in midlife increases the risk of dementia later in life. Again, vegans tend to have lower levels and it's the same story for blood pressure and heart disease.

The more risk factors you have, the higher your risk of dementia. The good news is these risk factors can be prevented or reversed by eating healthily and making lifestyle changes. In midlife, switching to healthier plant fats, increasing vegetables and decreasing salt and sugar, is linked to a significantly lower risk of dementia. Individual nutrients make little or no difference – it's the whole diet that reduces the risk.

EAT YOUR GREENS AND BERRIES!

The MIND diet, from Rush University in Chicago, focuses on fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, pulses, nuts and extra-virgin olive oil. It emphasises green leafy veg and berries – known to protect brain health. It contains very little (if any) red meat, butter, pastries, sweets and fried/fast food – all are best avoided. Studies show that people who eat the most brain-healthy foods, according to the MIND diet, have cognitive decline equivalent to being up to 11 years younger than those eating an unhealthy diet.

Green leafy vegetables provide folate, vitamin E and other nutrients linked to brain health. They also contain carotenoids and polyphenols that have potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Inflammation is one of the key factors thought to increase the risk of dementia. Omega-3 fats from flaxseeds and their oil, chia seeds and walnuts can also help combat inflammation.

A typical Western diet, packed with meat, dairy, processed and sugary foods, promotes the chronic conditions linked to dementia. High-fat and sugar-rich diets cause detrimental changes in gut bacteria that can trigger inflammation.

Those eating the most pro-inflammatory foods may be three times more likely to develop dementia. Another reason why meaty, fatty, sugary diets are bad news.

VITAMINS D AND B12

Low levels of vitamins D and B12 are linked to an increased risk of dementia. Ensure a regular intake of vitamin B12 and take a vitamin D supplement in winter – everyone should do this.

Regular physical activity, getting enough sleep, avoiding smoking and keeping alcohol within recommended limits can also reduce your risk.

To protect your brain health, base your diet around fruit and vegetables (with plenty of berries and leafy greens), wholegrains, pulses, nuts and seeds (walnuts, ground flaxseed or an algal supplement) plus vitamin B12 and vitamin D in the winter.

