

Brain Health As You Age: Key Facts and Resources



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Alcohol Use

Alcohol may act differently in older adults than in younger people. Some older adults can feel “high” without increasing the amount of alcohol they drink. This can make them more likely to be confused or have accidents, including falls, broken bones, and car crashes, which can cause head injuries among other problems.

If people choose to drink alcohol, U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans say that moderate drinking is up to two drinks a day for men, and one for women.

Some people should not drink alcohol. Many older adults should be extra careful because they often take medicines that can interact with it. For example:

- Alcohol and over-the-counter cough and cold remedies together can cause drowsiness and potential accidental overdoses. Older people are at even greater risk for these side effects.
- Using alcohol with common blood pressure medicines can increase risk for dizziness, drowsiness, and changes in heartbeat.

Talk with your health care provider if you have concerns or questions about alcohol and your health. You can also consult these websites for more information about alcohol in general and its effects as we age.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

On pages 30-32, offers guidelines related to drinking alcohol.

<http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2010/DietaryGuidelines2010.pdf>

Age Page: Alcohol Use in Older People

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Offers basic information about alcohol use as people age and provides links to national resources.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/alcohol-use-older-people>



Older Adults and Alcohol: You Can Get Help

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Provides information and help in determining whether alcohol is a problem and what to do if it is.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/older-adults-and-alcohol>

Aging, Medicines and Alcohol

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Provides basic information on problems related to alcohol and medicines for consumers and provides a hotline to contact with questions.

<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA12-3619/SMA12-3619.pdf>

Rethinking Drinking

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

Offers information about “how much is too much” when it comes to alcohol, and tips and tools to help change drinking habits.

<http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/>



Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, or loss of certain brain functions, among older adults. Memory loss is usually its first sign.

Early signs of Alzheimer's disease are:

- Finding it hard to remember things
- Asking the same questions over and over
- Having trouble paying bills or solving simple math problems
- Getting lost
- Losing things or putting them in odd places

Later signs of Alzheimer's disease:

- Forgetting how to brush teeth or comb hair
- Being confused about time, people, or places
- Forgetting names of common things, such as a desk, house, or apple
- Wandering away from home

No one knows how to prevent Alzheimer's disease. There are no pills, foods, or brain games that have been proven to prevent dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. However, we do have information about factors that may increase risk for Alzheimer's, such as heart disease and diabetes, and you may be able to reduce your risks by living a healthy life.

Preventing Alzheimer's Disease, What Do We Know?

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Describes what the research tells us and has yet to explain about reducing risk factors linked to Alzheimer's disease.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/preventing-alzheimers-disease>

Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Provides basic information about the disease, signs that it may be occurring, stages of the disease, and links to national and community resources.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/alzheimers-disease-fact-sheet>



Alzheimer's Disease

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Provides basic information about the disease and links to national resources.

<http://www.cdc.gov/features/alzheimers/>



Brain Injuries

Avoiding accidents, such as falls, is an important way to prevent head injuries that can hurt the brain.

To prevent accidents, there are a number of things you can do. Learn about and deal with risks for falls and participate in fall prevention programs. Wear helmets and seat belts to help prevent head injuries as well. Remember to buckle your children or grandchildren into safety or booster seats every time they ride in a car. It is also important to avoid drinking alcohol when driving, and to avoid driving when taking certain medicines. Finally, keep guns and bullets stored in a locked cabinet.

Falls and Older Adults

Source: NIH

Provides information on causes of and risk factors for falls, and explains how to protect oneself.

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/falls/aboutfalls/01.html>

Help Seniors Live Better, Longer: Prevent Traumatic Brain Injury

Source: CDC

Contains materials that help families prevent, recognize, and respond to brain injury among older people.

<http://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/seniors.html>

Traumatic Brain Injury: Hope Through Research

Source: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke at NIH

Describes serious head injuries, prevention, and rehabilitation.

www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/tbi



Dementia

People with dementia have significant problems in cognitive function – the ability to think, remember, or reason – that interferes with normal activities and relationships. They may also lose their ability to solve problems and control their emotions, and sometimes may have personality changes and behavioral problems. Dementia is not a disease, but the general term for these symptoms. The diseases that can cause dementia are Alzheimer’s disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, Huntington’s disease, and other conditions.

Some medicines to treat dementia like Alzheimer’s disease can delay symptoms for a period of time. Certain types of dementia can be reversed with appropriate treatment. Depending on the type of dementia, other approaches, like computerized recall devices or note taking, may help.

No brain game or other specific type of mental activity has been proven directly to prevent or slow the development of dementia. However, keeping the mind active through a variety of activities has been linked to a reduced risk of dementia.

The Dementias: Hope through Research

Source: NIH

Offers general information about dementia.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/dementias>



Depression

Depression is a condition with feelings of sadness that last for weeks at a time.

If someone has several of the following symptoms that last more than two weeks, he or she should see a doctor.

- An empty feeling, ongoing sadness, and anxiety
- Tiredness, lack of energy
- Loss of interest or pleasure in everyday activities, including sex
- Sleep problems
- Eating more or less than usual
- Crying too often or too much
- Having aches and pains that don't go away when treated
- Having difficulty focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling guilty, helpless, worthless, or hopeless
- Being irritable
- Having thoughts of death or suicide or attempting suicide

Your health care provider or local programs can help, and Medicare covers mental health services.

If you or someone you know is in a crisis, you need to get help immediately. You can:

- Call 911
- Visit a nearby emergency department or your health care provider's office
- Call the toll-free, 24-hour hotline of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), 1-800-799-4TTY (4889) to talk to a trained counselor

Age Page: Depression

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Provides the basics on depression among older adults along with connections to national and community resources.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/depression>

Depression Is Not a Normal Part of Growing Older

Source: CDC

Provides basic information about depression and connections to national resources.

<http://www.cdc.gov/aging/mentalhealth/depression.htm>



Diabetes

People get diabetes when their blood glucose level, sometimes called blood sugar, is too high. Our bodies change the foods we eat into glucose, and insulin helps the glucose get into our cells to make energy. When you have diabetes, your body may not make enough insulin or may not use it correctly. Diabetes can lead to dangerous health problems like heart attack or stroke, and some studies suggest that diabetes may be a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease.

Age Page: Diabetes in Older People – A Disease You Can Manage

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Provides basic information about the disease and links to community resources.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/diabetes-older-people-disease-you-can-manage>

Basics about Diabetes

Source: CDC

Defines diabetes, lists symptoms, and provides links to many resources about controlling the condition.

<http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/consumer/learn.htm>

National Diabetes Education Program (NDEP)

Source: Cosponsored by NIH and CDC

Provides information about diabetes.

<http://ndep.nih.gov/>

Information specifically for older adults: <http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org> (search for "older adults").



Chronic Disease Self-Management Program and Diabetes Self-Management Program

Source: National Council on Aging

These programs, which are available through many Area Agencies on Aging, help older adults learn how to manage chronic conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes through healthier eating, more movement, appropriate use of medicines, stress reduction, and tips for talking with your doctor.

Program information: <http://www.ncoa.org/improve-health/center-for-healthy-aging/chronic-disease-1.html>

Contact local Area Agency on Aging/find a program: www.eldercare.gov.



Eating Right

Healthy habits can reduce the risk of many chronic conditions like heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

You can find out about healthy diets from your health care provider and from local agencies.

Nutrition programs at Area Agencies on Aging provide meals and related services to older people in a variety of places like senior centers, or in older people's homes, if they are homebound. Services are targeted to those in greatest social and economic need.

The Chronic Disease Self-Management Program can also help.

Older Americans Nutrition Programs

Source: Eldercare Locator

Provides nutritious meals in group (e.g., senior center) settings or delivered to a person's home.

http://www.eldercare.gov/eldercare.net/public/resources/topic/Food_Nutrition.aspx#find

Young at Heart: Tips for Older Adults

Source: NIH

Provides information about steps older adults can take to improve their health, including eating better.

Healthy Eating focus: http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/young_heart.htm#e

Full publication: <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/PDFs/youngatheart.pdf>.

What's On Your Plate? Smart Food Choices for Healthy Aging

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

A guide to help older adults make wise decisions about what they eat as they get older. Tailored specifically for older adults' nutritional issues, it offers information about food groups, serving sizes, food labels, and more.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/whats-your-plate-smart-food-choices-healthy-aging>



Fit and Fabulous as You Mature

Source: Weight-Control Information Network of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases at NIH

Offers ideas for moving more and eating right.

<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/mature.htm>

Your Guide to Lowering Your Blood Pressure with DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension)

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at NIH

Provides a brief introduction to a diet proven to lower blood pressure when followed carefully.

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/dash_brief.pdf



Exercise and Being Active

To learn more about how to move or exercise in a healthy way, ask your health care provider about your personal situation. He or she can help you determine the best form(s) of exercise and how much you should do. The Chronic Disease Self-Management Program can also help. Resources like exercise programs can be very helpful.

While exercise has not been proven to prevent or reduce risk of dementia, emerging evidence suggests that it may play a role. Staying active can improve your heart health and your circulatory system and could even be helpful if you suffer from a neurological disease such as Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis.

Go4Life®

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

This physical activity and exercise campaign for older adults has an interactive website offering evidence-based exercises, guidance on how to get started and keep going with an exercise routine, and videos demonstrating exercises while discussing tips on how to incorporate physical activity and exercise into older adults' daily lives. The campaign features partnerships with community organizations and agencies.

www.nia.nih.gov/go4life

Young at Heart: Tips for Older Adults

Source: NIH

Provides information about steps that older adults can take to improve their health, including moving more.

Physical Activity focus: http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/young_heart.htm#h

Full publication: <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/PDFs/youngatheart.pdf>

Fit and Fabulous as You Mature

Source: Weight-Control Information Network of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases at NIH

Offers ideas for moving more and eating right.

<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/mature.htm>



How Much Physical Activity Do Older Adults Need?

Source: CDC

Fact sheet that offers guidelines on the frequency and types of exercise that older adults need to promote good health.

<http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/guidelines/olderadults.html>



Health Screenings

It is critical to check with your health care provider about recommended health screenings. Medicare will pay for some screenings and provider visits without a copayment. For example, Medicare beneficiaries are entitled to a Welcome to Medicare visit within 12 months of joining the program and an annual wellness visit, both of which have no copayments or deductibles.

General Screening Recommendations for Chronic Disease and Risk Factors in Older Adults

Source: Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing

Summarizes recommendations on screening frequency for older adults. Recommendations come from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, and the American Geriatrics Society, among others.

http://consultgerirn.org/uploads/File/trythis/try_this_27.pdf



Healthy Aging

Living a healthy life is important for better aging and reducing important risks to brain health. To learn more about staying healthy, you can take part in healthy aging programs at local Area Agencies on Aging and their service providers or other activities in your community. You can also work with your health care provider.

Women: Stay Healthy at 50+

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Provides information to help women stay healthy at age 50 and above. Addresses screening tests needed and when to get them, which medicines may prevent diseases, and daily steps to take for good health.

<http://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/prevention/lifestyle/women-over-50.html>

Men: Stay Healthy at 50+

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Provides information to help men stay healthy at age 50 and above. Addresses screening tests needed and when to get them, which medicines may prevent diseases, and daily steps to take for good health.

<http://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/patient-involvement/healthy-men/men-over-50.html>

NIHSeniorHealth.gov

Source: National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine at NIH

Offers information for older adults in an easy-to-read format featuring videos and healthy aging tips.

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/>



Heart Health/High Blood Pressure

Your heart's health has an effect on the health of your brain. Heart disease and high blood pressure affect how blood circulates in your body, and they are major risk factors for stroke, which damages your brain. Heart disease can limit the flow of blood through the body, including the brain. Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing through your arteries and it can create problems for the brain when too high or too low.

Check with your health care provider for help in dealing with heart conditions, high blood pressure, or cholesterol levels.

Age Page: High Blood Pressure

Source: *National Institute on Aging at NIH*

Gives basic information about how to control high blood pressure.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/high-blood-pressure>

In Brief: Your Guide to Lowering Your Blood Pressure with DASH

Source: *NIH*

Describes the basics of a healthy eating plan that has been proven to lower blood pressure.

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/dash_brief.pdf

High Blood Cholesterol: What You Need to Know

Source: *National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at NIH*

Provides information about healthy cholesterol levels and how to achieve them.

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/chol/wyntk.pdf>

Chronic Disease Self-Management and Diabetes Self-Management Programs

Source: *National Council on Aging*

Help older people learn how to manage chronic conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes through healthier eating, more movement, appropriate use of medicines, and stress reduction. Also provide tips for talking to doctors.

Program information: <http://www.ncoa.org/improve-health/center-for-healthy-aging/chronic-disease-1.html>

Contact local Area Agency on Aging/find a program: www.eldercare.gov



Medicines

Taking your medicines properly is important, and you should check with your health care providers before making any changes. Sometimes, your prescribed or over-the-counter medicines may interact poorly, or you could get prescriptions from different health care providers that duplicate or interfere with one another. Remember, alcohol and many medicines don't mix. Check with your doctor, pharmacist, or health care provider to determine whether your medicines could be improved.

Safe Use of Medicines

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Offers easy-to-read basics about medicine use and provides further resources.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/safe-use-medicines>

Alcohol Use and Older Adults

Source: NIHSeniorHealth.gov

Includes information about the dangers of combining alcohol with medicines.

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/alcoholuse/alcoholandaging/01.html>

Medication Safety Basics

Source: CDC

Discusses how adults should take medicines safely and appropriately.

<http://www.cdc.gov/medicationsafety/basics.html>

Ten Medications Older Adults Should Avoid or Take with Caution

Source: American Geriatrics Society

Discusses medications to avoid or use with caution, and their side effects.

<http://www.americangeriatrics.org/files/documents/beers/FHATipMEDS.pdf>



Memory

Age Page: Forgetfulness: Knowing When to Ask For Help

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Offers general information about memory as we age, mild cognitive impairment, and dementia.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/forgetfulness-knowing-when-ask-help>



Research on Brain Health: How You Can Help

Scientists are studying how to keep our brains healthy as we age. Some studies track people over many years and others test potential medicines or other possible ways to reduce risks to brain health. This research is mostly done by scientists at academic medical centers, pharmaceutical and biotech companies, or the federal government.

The success of these studies depends on people volunteering to participate in them. Please get advice from your health care provider before taking part in a study. These websites can help you find studies that need volunteers and tell you more about taking part in research.

NIH Clinical Research Trials and You

Source: NIH

Discusses how clinical trials are conducted and how you and your privacy and information are protected.

<http://www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials/index.htm>

Clinicaltrials.gov

Contains a searchable database of federally- and privately-supported clinical trials. It contains information about each study's purpose, who can join, locations, and contact information.

<http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>

Research Match

Connects researchers with people to participate in their studies. The free, secure registry makes it easier for you to volunteer for current and future studies.

<http://www.researchmatch.org/?rm=CRAWebsite>



Sleep

Not sleeping well or lack of sleep can lead to a number of problems. Older adults who have poor nighttime sleep are more likely to feel depressed, have attention and memory problems, suffer from excessive daytime sleepiness, experience more nighttime falls, and use more over-the-counter or prescription sleep aids. There are many reasons why older adults may not get enough sleep.

Age Page: A Good Night's Sleep

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Provides basic information on the importance of sleep for older adults and tips on getting a better night's rest.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/good-nights-sleep>



Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea means that you have one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breaths while you sleep. Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes and may occur five times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound. Untreated sleep apnea can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart attack, heart failure, stroke, obesity, diabetes, and accidents. Some research shows that sleep apnea may increase the risk of developing brain diseases.

Signs of sleep apnea include:

- Restless sleep
- Loud snoring (with periods of silence followed by gasps)
- Falling asleep during the day
- Morning headaches
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability and moodiness
- Forgetfulness
- Anxiety
- Depression

Not everyone who has these symptoms will have sleep apnea. If you experience even a few of these symptoms, visit your health care provider.

Sleep Apnea Information Page

Source: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke at NIH

Defines sleep apnea and provides links to national organizations working in this area.

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/sleep_apnea/sleep_apnea.htm

What is Sleep Apnea?

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at NIH

Defines sleep apnea, discusses treatments, and has a video to help people understand the condition.

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/sleepapnea/>



Smoking

Quitting smoking benefits you in many ways, including brain health, and is beneficial at any age. Your health care provider, local programs, or these resources can help you.

Smokefree

Source: National Cancer Institute at NIH

Offers science-driven tools, information, and support that have been effective in helping smokers quit.

<http://smokefree.gov/>

Age Page: Smoking: It's Never too Late to Stop

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Provides information and links to help older people stop smoking.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/smoking-its-never-too-late-stop>

LiveHelp

Source: National Cancer Institute at NIH

Provides people with opportunities to ask questions about quitting smoking.

https://livehelp.cancer.gov/app/chat/chat_launch

Strategies to Quit Smoking

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at NIH

Offers tips and a video as well as links to smoking hotlines.

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/smo/strategies.html>

How to Quit

Source: CDC

Contains resources for people who want to quit smoking.

http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/quit_smoking/how_to_quit/index.htm

Quit Lines: 1-800-QUIT-NOW (784-8669)



Staying Connected

Emerging research suggests that doing activities you enjoy may help maintain well-being as you age. Older adults who do what they believe to be meaningful say they feel happier and healthier. Some studies find lower rates of dementia among people who stay socially active and connected with others, although no specific activity has been shown to prevent or slow dementia. These websites have tips on staying connected.

Participating in Activities You Enjoy – More than Just Fun and Games

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Describes the benefits of being active in a community and staying involved.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/participating-activities-you-enjoy-more-just-fun-and-games>

AARP Experience Corps

Source: AARP

Engages older adult tutors in improving K-3 student literacy in disadvantaged schools.

<http://www.aarp.org/experience-corps>

RSVP

Source: Corporation for National & Community Service

Offers an opportunity to join one of the largest volunteer networks in the nation for people aged 55 and over. Older adults can use the skills and talents they have learned over the years, or develop new ones, to serve in a variety of volunteer capacities within their communities. Opportunities can involve teaching and tutoring.

<http://www.cns.gov/programs/senior-corps/rsvp>



Stroke

A stroke, or “brain attack,” happens when blood flow to the brain is interrupted. When this happens, brain cells begin to die because they are not getting the oxygen and nutrients they need. The symptoms of a stroke happen very quickly and include:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking, or understanding speech
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

If you have any of these symptoms or see someone with these symptoms, **call 911 immediately**.

The best treatment for stroke is prevention. If you smoke, quit. If you have high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, or high cholesterol, getting them under control and keeping them under control will greatly reduce your chances of having a stroke.

The following resources can be viewed, ordered, or downloaded online.

Know Stroke. Know the Signs. Act in Time.

Source: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke at NIH

Describes the importance of knowing the symptoms of a stroke and acting immediately.

www.ninds.nih.gov/education

Brain Basics: Preventing Stroke

Source: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke at NIH

Details healthy living habits for preventing stroke. Includes charts for scoring your stroke risk.

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/stroke/preventing_stroke.htm



Additional Resources

For more information on community programs, contact your local Area Agency on Aging or Aging and Disability Resource Center. Or, go to www.eldercare.gov.

To find Internet resources on various topics, go to:

Health & Aging Website

Source: National Institute on Aging at NIH

Offers information about a variety of health conditions and ways to live a healthier life.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health>

General Health and Disease Information

Source: NIH

<http://www.nih.gov>

Find out about participating in research at www.clinicaltrials.gov.

Health Information for Older Adults

Source: Healthy Aging Program, CDC

Provides links to a wide variety of healthy aging topics of interest to older adults.

<http://www.cdc.gov/aging/aginginfo/index.htm>