



Deflecting dementia

Brain care to protect yourself against Alzheimer's disease

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AS A BUSY MODERN PARENT, you find your days overfilled with work, household duties, chauffeuring your teen to hockey and doing errands for your elderly mom. Ever the dutiful daughter — or son — you encourage your 75-year-old mother to get enough exercise, eat properly and see her doctor regularly.

Seeing her doctor is especially important if your mom starts to take less interest in hobbies, repeats questions or stories, has trouble learning how to use gadgets, forgets what day it is, puts things in illogical places and has problems handling financial affairs or remembering appointments. These are the warning signs of Alzheimer's disease (AD) and other forms of dementia.

As the population ages, a wave of people with these intellectual deficits is expected to hit families across the country. Currently, some 500,000 Canadians are living with AD, and within a generation, that number is expected to more than double to 1.1 million. Most cases of AD are not inherited conditions. But a small percentage are, and if you have a parent or sibling with AD, your chances of developing this disease increase about threefold.

This impending wave of dementia, dubbed the “silver tsunami,” will pose incredible challenges for Canadian families. Women, traditionally the family caregivers, will be shouldering much of the load. A study by the Canadian Institute for Health Information showed that one in six people caring for seniors experiences distress; that number increases threefold when the senior has cognitive impairment, such as with AD.

Here are some tips gleaned from recent studies and leading experts on how your parents — and you — can help to keep your brains in tip-top shape.



KEEP PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

Any amount of activity will help slow cognitive decline. “We’re not talking about a four-minute mile, just nice, modest but regular exercise,” says Dr. Jack Diamond, scientific director emeritus of the Toronto-based Alzheimer Society of Canada.

The activity doesn’t have to be walking or other aerobic activity; weight training can be effective, too. And it doesn’t have to be strenuous; anything that gets the blood and oxygen flowing — even wiggling your legs and putting your arms up — can be beneficial.

The exercise may increase circuits in the brain, but it may also just be a case of engaging in a pleasurable activity with others or some exercise spinoff such as reduced cholesterol levels or improved mood, which can maintain brain health, says Dr. Jane Rylett, a molecular neurobiologist at The University of Western Ontario in London and an expert in the chemical signals that brain cells use to communicate.

KEEP YOUR BRAIN STIMULATED

Intellectually challenging activities — for example, doing crossword puzzles — help to maintain brain function. A Rush University study in Chicago followed a group of nuns who had kept diaries and written letters when they were younger and found that those who had used complex sentence structures and a diverse vocabulary had a much lower risk of AD decades later.

Another study of taxi drivers in London, England, who had to memorize complex road systems and addresses for their jobs, found that they had a relatively low incidence of cognitive impairment. “The more things we do that expand cognitive reserve when we’re younger, the more likelihood we have of delaying or even stopping age-related cognitive impairment as we get older,” says Rylett.

STAY SOCIALLY ENGAGED

Research shows that providing animals with an enriched environment full of challenges and activities increases the connectivity in their brains, thereby making their brains work better. Being socially active offers the same enriched environment for humans. So going to the theatre, playing bridge, learning a new language or going out dancing with friends will help to keep your brain on the ball.

EAT A HEALTHY DIET

Recent evidence supports the brain-preserving power of the Mediterranean diet, which is rich in olive oil, certain fruits, nuts, legumes and vegetables, fish containing healthy fats, and a moderate amount of wine, preferably red. This dietary regime is associated not only with slower cognitive decline but also with a reduced risk that mild cognitive impairment will progress to full-blown AD.

CONSIDER SUPPLEMENTS

Some studies suggest that supplements such as vitamins B, C, D and E may be good for the brain. One recent study, however, showed that ginkgo biloba



supplements did not provide any benefit. Consider supplements if your doctor okays them.

PUT AWAY THE SALT SHAKER

A recent study that documented the sodium consumption and physical activity levels of 1,262 healthy older Quebec residents found that those who have a high-salt diet and are sedentary may be at higher risk of cognitive decline. The study illustrates that sodium not only damages the heart but also damages the brain, says lead author Dr. Alexandra Fiocco, an assistant professor of biological psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto.

CHOLESTEROL & BLOOD PRESSURE

If blood cholesterol and blood pressure become too high, they can adversely affect the brain’s vascular system and

CHANGING LIFESTYLES

Reducing the prevalence of lifestyle-based risk factors by 25% could potentially prevent three million cases of Alzheimer’s disease worldwide. Modifiable risk factors include hypertension, obesity, smoking, depression, mental stagnation, social isolation, physical inactivity and diabetes.

impede blood flow to the brain, which can raise the risk for AD, says Rylett.

AVOID HEAD INJURIES

There's mounting evidence that repeated head trauma increases the risk for dementia.

A study released in 2011 at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC) in Paris showed that older military veterans who

experienced traumatic brain injury had a more than twofold increase in the risk of developing dementia. Another study found that former American National Football League players are at elevated risk for mild cognitive impairment compared with non-athletes.

MAINTAIN AN IDEAL BODY WEIGHT

Obesity is a risk factor for dementia, but the good news is that when you

lose weight, your brain can recover. A recent study found that obese people who underwent bariatric surgery showed evidence of improved memory function. Obesity also increases your chances of developing type 2 diabetes, another risk factor for brain decline.

SEE YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU SUFFER CHRONIC ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION

These mood disorders have been linked to dementia. Research released at the AAIC showed that people who avoid stress, anxiety and depression have the lowest risk for losing brain power — even if they experience life-threatening illnesses or violence.

STAY IN SCHOOL

Studies consistently show that poor levels of education are a risk factor for cognitive decline, although it is a widely held belief that individuals with little education are likely to have other risk factors such as a poor diet or low levels of exercise, says Diamond. It might also have something to do with the stimulating effect of lifelong learning, says Rylett. People with a higher education level might have developed the habit of doing activities that exercise the mind.

DON'T SMOKE

Mounting evidence associates smoking, and even exposure to second-hand smoke, with an increased risk of dementia.

WHAT YOU CAN DO IF MOM OR DAD GETS A DIAGNOSIS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

- **HAVE A FAMILY CONFERENCE.** Determine who will be in charge of your parent's affairs or be the family advocate or spokesperson.
- **DISCUSS FINANCIAL ISSUES.** Often, one of the first signs of dementia is not paying bills or starting to donate to questionable causes or organizations. Consider establishing a joint bank account with your parent and assuming power of attorney for family property, potential costs of home care, day care, respite care and social services.
- **INVESTIGATE MEDICAL AND LEGAL ISSUES.** Familiarize yourself with advance directives, living wills and power of attorney for health care. Consider a living trust, guardianship and will preparation.



LOOKING AFTER AN ELDER?

For tips and information on caring for an elderly relative, and for support and guidance, visit www.mycarejourney.com. Experts share their insights into such issues as how to communicate with doctors, find the best long-term care facility and help aging loved ones while respecting their need for independence and control.

A CAREGIVER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

If you have a parent with Alzheimer's disease (AD) and are frustrated with his or her unwanted and strange behaviours, pick up a copy of *Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias: The Caregiver's Complete Survival Guide* by Nataly Rubinstein (Two Harbors Press, 2011). A clinical social worker and certified geriatric care manager specializing in dementias, Rubinstein served for 16 years as the primary caregiver for her mother, who had dementia. The book explains 10 common behaviours of AD patients (such as wandering the house all night or compulsively loading and unloading the dishwasher) and provides practical advice on how to handle them. The key, says Rubinstein, is to come to terms with the fact that the source of your negative reaction is not necessarily your loved one, but you. "Sure, many behaviours are unhealthy and dangerous for you and your loved one. Other times, though, it's not the actual behaviour that's causing so much trouble — it's our reaction to that behaviour, based on the mindset we've locked ourselves into."

FACTS AND STATS

In 2010...

- More than 500,000 Canadians were living with dementia.
- One out of 11 Canadians over age 65 had dementia.
- Within a generation, the number of Canadians living with dementia will more than double to 1.1 million.
- The direct and indirect costs of dementia in Canada were an estimated \$22 billion a year, rising to an estimated \$153 billion a year within a generation unless preventive measures are taken.