



New Survey: Science-Backed Habits Reduce Dementia Risk, but Many Americans Are Misinformed

A new survey from Reader's Digest and the Alzheimer's Association reveals that many Americans don't realize certain habits can lower risk of cognitive decline and don't prioritize brain health compared with other aspects of well-being.

By Lauren Gelman

The statistics on Alzheimer's are grim: Today, 5.3 million Americans are living with the degenerative brain disease, a figure expected to grow to up to 16 million by the year 2050. It's the sixth-leading cause of death in America, and the only one of the top 10 causes of death in America that can't be prevented, treated, or slowed down. Year after year, drug trials to help treat Alzheimer's disease begin with promise and end without positive results, leading scientists to keep researching new approaches.

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News like this can make anyone throw up their hands in the air and feel as though they don't have control over the health of their brain, but a growing body of research—as highlighted in a new report from the Alzheimer's Association published in the journal *Alzheimer's & Dementia*—reveals that's actually not the case at all.

Indeed, reams of studies reveal that habits related to exercise, diet, smoking, and more can impact our risk for cognitive decline or more minor deficits in memory and brain function. "The research on cognitive decline is still evolving," Angela Geiger, Chief Strategy Officer, Alzheimer's Association, said in a press release. "But there are actions people can take."

Reader's Digest partnered with the Alzheimer's Association to survey approximately 1,600 people during the month of May 2015 about their brain health and their knowledge of how lifestyle habits affect cognitive decline and dementia. (The Reader's Digest Association will publish a book this fall about lifestyle habits for a healthier brain, called *Outsmarting Alzheimer's* by Kenneth S. Kosik, MD).

We unearthed important findings and misconceptions that could affect how people approach their brain health. Here, four takeaways for a healthier, sharper mind.

1. Not all brain-healthy habits are equally effective

The good news: 91 percent of survey respondents said it was true that they have the power to reduce their risk for developing cognitive decline. And it is, the Alzheimer's Association confirms. But some lifestyle habits are more strongly supported by scientific evidence than others.



Survey says: A whopping 89 percent of respondents said that adequate sleep can protect your brain from cognitive decline. More agreed that sleep was a brain-healthy habit than any other habit, including exercise or quitting smoking.

Fact: Several studies link sleep issues like insomnia and sleep apnea to increased risk for cognitive decline, but according to the new Alzheimer's Association report, the link is not well understood. Nor is it clear whether sleep disturbances cause dementia or are simply a related symptom of dementia. The report classifies sleep disturbances as having "lower evidence" for raising the risk of cognitive decline.

Survey says: 88 percent of respondents said exercise can protect your brain from cognitive decline.

Fact: Indeed, more than 20 different studies have shown that physical activity is linked with a decreased risk of cognitive impairment and/or improved cognitive function, according to the Alzheimer's Association report. Several randomized controlled trials found that inactive but healthy seniors who begin exercising have a significant improvement in cognitive function. The report classifies physical activity as having "strong evidence" for decreasing risk of cognitive decline.

Survey says: Only 62 percent of respondents said that quitting smoking protects the brain from cognitive decline.

Fact: It's a powerful way to lower your risk. According to the report, quitting smoking may reduce the risk of cognitive decline to levels comparable to those who have never smoked. One large study found that heavy smoking in middle age as much as doubled the risk of dementia later in life. The report classifies current smoking as having "strong evidence" for raising the risk of cognitive decline.

Survey says: 80 percent of respondents said that staying social with family and friends can protect the brain from cognitive decline.

Fact: You've got to have friends—and there are many powerful health benefits of being social—but the evidence for this habit is considered "unclear" in the report. Individual studies have shown that social activities and larger social networks are linked with better cognitive function and a reduced risk of cognitive decline, according to the report, but an independent analysis of long-term studies didn't find effects on cognitive function.

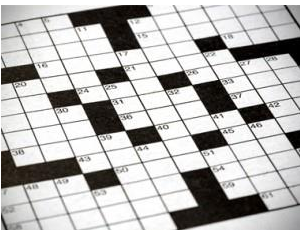


2. A healthy diet is good for your brain, but there are no magic bullets

Headlines might have you believe that simply eating, say, more salmon or blueberries can prevent cognitive decline. Indeed, 69 percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement, “Research shows you can reduce your risk of cognitive decline by eating one or two of the right ‘super foods.’”

But according to the Alzheimer’s Association report, information about effects of specific nutrients, vitamins, foods, or food groups is limited and conflicting. A few studies on the Mediterranean diet (little red meat, with an emphasis on whole grains, fruits, vegetables, fish, nuts, and olive oil) or a diet that combines the Mediterranean diet with the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet have found a link to a reduced risk of cognitive decline. The report classifies a Mediterranean diet as having “moderate evidence” for decreasing risk.

However, most people don’t think about their diet as having any impact on brain health at all, our survey found. While 36 percent of respondents said they try to eat healthy to live a long life and 19 percent said they do so to keep their heart healthy, a mere 5 percent of survey respondents said they eat healthy to keep their brain healthy.



3. Lifelong learning is critical, but crossword puzzles might be overrated

Sixty percent of our survey respondents agreed with the statement, “Research shows if you buy the right puzzle, game, or app, you can reduce your risk of cognitive decline.” But you can’t rely on a single game or activity to protect your brain; indeed it may be more effective to constantly challenge your mind with different games, learning new things, and trying new activities. (For example, doing a crossword puzzle a day might not be as healthy for your brain as doing a mix of crosswords, Sudoku, and other puzzles, which all encourage neural plasticity—or creating and strengthening connections between brain cells).

Unfortunately, fewer survey respondents were aware of such habits: Only 53 percent agreed that learning to play an instrument could help protect the brain from cognitive decline and only 59 percent thought that taking a class could help.

The Alzheimer’s Association report says cognitive training has “moderate evidence” for decreasing the risk of cognitive decline. One prominent review found that three dozen randomized controlled trials showed

improvements in memory among people who did brain training exercises compared with those who didn't, but most studies were fairly small.



4. Heart health and brain health are more connected than people realize

“Certain healthy behaviors known to be effective for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer are also good for brain health and reducing the risk of cognitive decline,” the Alzheimer’s Association report concludes.

But in our survey, respondents seemed to think they had more control over their heart health than their brain health: While 84 percent of people strongly agreed that there were things they could do to keep their heart healthy and 81 percent of people strongly agreed that there were things they could do to keep their lungs healthy, only 72 percent of people felt there were things they could do to keep their brains healthy.

They also prioritized heart health over brain health: 58 percent of respondents said that the heart was the most important organ from a health perspective. (The brain was deemed the second-most important, at 33 percent. Lungs, muscles, skin, and breasts each came in at less than 5 percent).

Perhaps people don’t realize that habits that are good for the heart (preventing diabetes, maintaining a healthy weight, lowering high blood pressure, and not smoking) also have strong evidence for protecting the brain against cognitive decline.