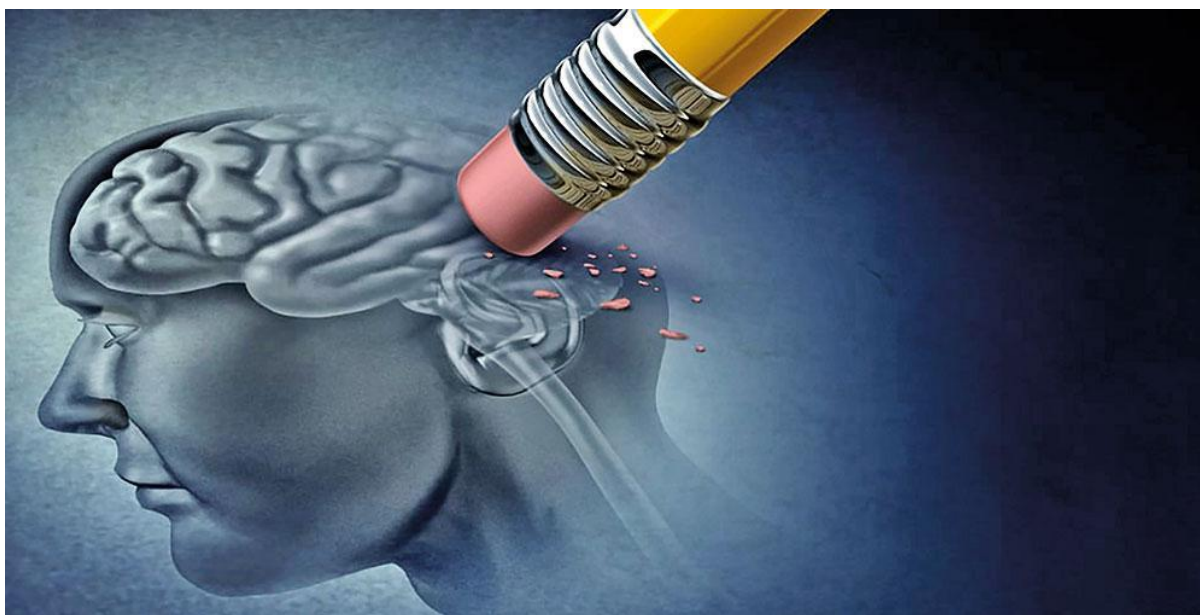


Dementia's 14 Avoidable Risks

How we can fight back

An article to mark World Alzheimer's Month 2025

By Romany Parakrama



*By the time most people hear the word dementia, it's often attached to a diagnosis and is an irreversible condition already altering lives. But researchers say it doesn't have to be this way for everyone. According to the latest Lancet Commission findings, nearly 45% of dementia cases could be prevented or delayed by tackling 14 modifiable risk factors. That's almost half of all cases gone or at least pushed far into the future through changes in lifestyle, healthcare, and community action. Dementia is not a single disease but an umbrella term for a range of conditions, including Alzheimer's disease, that impair memory, thinking, and daily function. While age and genetics remain powerful drivers, scientists stress that the brain's fate is also shaped by decades of small, cumulative choices and environmental exposures. **Let's look at these 14 factors spread across early life, mid-life, and late life and see what they mean for individuals, families, and public health.***

Early Life: Building the Brain's Reserve

1. Limited Education

The first protective measure begins long before grey hair or even adulthood. Studies show that completing more years of formal education builds cognitive reserve, the brain's resilience to damage. Less time in school can leave neural networks less equipped to cope with the changes dementia brings. It's why public health experts push for universal access to quality primary and secondary education, and why lifelong learning through reading, hobbies, or new skills can still help in later years.

Mid-Life: The Decades of Greatest Impact

This is the stage roughly between the ages of 40 to 65 when our brains silently bank risk or protection.

2. Hypertension

High blood pressure damages blood vessels in the brain, setting the stage for strokes, mini-strokes, and cognitive decline. Controlling hypertension with diet, exercise, and medication (when needed) isn't just heart-smart it's brain-smart.

3. Hearing Loss

Untreated hearing impairment may rob the brain of stimulation and shrink social engagement, both of which accelerate decline. The simple act of using hearing aids when needed can reduce risk.

4. Smoking

Tobacco smoke narrows blood vessels, reduces oxygen to the brain, and increases inflammation. Quitting, even in mid-life can dramatically cut dementia risk while improving overall health.

5. Obesity

Excess weight, especially around the waist, is linked to vascular problems, insulin resistance, and inflammation which are all enemies of healthy brain function. Maintaining a balanced weight through diet and activity helps to keep the brain's support systems strong.



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6. Depression

Mid-life depression is more than an emotional struggle it is a biological stressor that may change brain structure and chemistry. Seeking treatment early, whether through therapy, medication, or lifestyle interventions, is both a mental health and cognitive health priority.

7. Physical Inactivity

The brain thrives on movement. Exercise boosts blood flow, encourages the growth of new brain cells, and improves mood. The World Health Organization recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week.

8. Diabetes

Poorly managed blood sugar damages nerves and vessels, raising dementia risk. Preventing or controlling type 2 diabetes through diet, exercise, and medication is a powerful brain safeguard.

9. Traumatic Brain Injury

From sports concussions to car accidents, repeated or severe head injuries increase dementia risk decades later. Prevention by using helmets, seatbelts and workplace safety is key.

10. Excessive Alcohol Consumption

Heavy or binge drinking damages brain tissue and raises the risk of early-onset dementia. Experts recommend staying within safe drinking guidelines or avoiding alcohol entirely.

11. High LDL (“Bad”) Cholesterol

High levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol contribute to artery-clogging plaques that impair blood flow to the brain. Regular cholesterol checks and heart-healthy diets benefit both heart and mind.

Late Life: Protecting the Vulnerable Years

As the brain ages, certain late-life factors become more influential.

12. Low Social Contact

Humans are wired for connection. Isolation can accelerate cognitive decline, while active social lives stimulate memory and reasoning skills. Clubs, volunteering, family time, or even regular phone calls can help.

13. Air Pollution

Microscopic pollutants can enter the bloodstream and brain, triggering inflammation. While individuals can't solve air quality alone, using air purifiers indoors, avoiding heavy traffic zones during exercise, and supporting clean air policies all help.

14. Untreated Vision Loss

Poor vision reduces social interaction, physical activity, and independence all of which contribute to cognitive decline. Regular eye exams and corrective lenses (or cataract surgery when needed) can maintain sensory input to the brain.



The message here is both urgent and hopeful. These 14 factors are modifiable which means change is possible. The sooner action begins, the more protection we can build. But even later in life, addressing these risks can slow progression and improve quality of life.

Public health plays a critical role. Affordable hearing aids, accessible mental health care, urban air quality improvements, safe playgrounds and sports regulations, and education policies are not luxuries. They are dementia prevention strategies.

Rani, aged 52 is a schoolteacher. She'd been putting off her blood pressure medication, dismissing her hearing difficulties, and finding less time for exercise. When her mother was diagnosed with dementia, she learned about the 14 risk factors at a community health talk. In the following year, she started walking every morning, got her hearing checked, adjusted her diet, and joined a local reading club.

"I can't change my genes," she says, "but I can change my habits. If I can delay what happened to my mother, even by a few years, that's precious time." Globally, dementia cases are projected to triple by 2050. In countries like Sri Lanka, where the over-60 population is growing rapidly, the impact will be profound on families, healthcare systems, and economies. By understanding and addressing these 14 factors, communities can turn the tide. Prevention is not about eliminating risk entirely which is near impossible but about shifting the odds in our favour.



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