

Tackling the myths and realities of dementia risk

Dementia is not a specific disease. It's an overall term that describes a group of symptoms associated with a decline in memory and thinking skill and potential changes to behaviour, mood and personality. Currently without a cure, and as many as 50 million adults aged over 65 are currently living with dementia, we are left wondering how we can prevent or slow down the progression of the disease.

A common belief amongst the general public about dementia is that it is a normal part of ageing and there is nothing we can do to prevent or delay its onset. Unfortunately, these misconceptions can make the prospect of the golden years seem like a big let-down. However, the scientific evidence tells a different story.

What many of us tend to overlook is the important role that living a healthy lifestyle can play in protecting against dementia. In fact, recent research highlights 14 modifiable risk factors that are associated with dementia. This means that there are things we can do now that can potentially increase or decrease our risk based on our current lifestyle choices.

These include having higher levels of education, more physical activity, a healthy diet, meaningful social engagement, and regular mental stimulation. In addition, smoking, depression, diabetes, high blood pressure, air pollution, obesity, hearing loss, and head injuries and sleep disorders are also associated with increased risk.



The good news is that work is currently underway in Australia to pave the way to better brain health. In one particular program, researchers at

Macquarie University have carefully designed a dementia risk program called *Brain Bootcamp* – an initiative that aims to raise awareness of how older adults might be able to reduce risk for dementia. It starts off with providing each individual their own brain health profile to prompt lifestyle changes. It's known that having physical



prompts in your environment (e.g., a fridge magnet with a message) and setting goals (e.g., I will exercise on Tuesdays) can create change in our behaviour. *Brain Bootcamp* uses similar methods to create a unique and personalised environment to collectively reduce dementia risk for seniors. More information about the program, as well as additional resources on healthy ageing is available at www.brainbootcamp.com.au.

If we all choose to focus on taking full advantage of the knowledge already generated and adjust the way we live to reduce dementia risk, then reducing the global prevalence of dementia is something we can look forward to.

This article was co-written by Laura Dodds, Dr Joyce Siette (developer of Brain Bootcamp) and Professor Viviana Wuthrich in the Centre for Ageing, Cognition & Wellbeing at Macquarie University.

<https://www.mq.edu.au/research/CACW>