

Dementia: What You Need To Know

Recorded: January 25, 2024

Transcript

[Introduction 0:00]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Here's what you need to know about dementia. I'm Dr. Anthony Levinson, a psychiatrist and a Professor at McMaster University's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences.

[What is dementia? 0:13]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Dementia is an umbrella term. There are actually hundreds of different causes of dementia, but normally we think about the most common ones. So, the most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer disease, which probably accounts for about 60% of all cases of dementia. Some of the other common causes include vascular dementia, Parkinson disease dementia, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, and, importantly, mixed dementia, often a mix of both Alzheimer and vascular disease.

Currently, over half a million people have a diagnosis of dementia in Canada, and that number is expected to double in less than ten years. Every year, about 25,000 people are newly diagnosed with dementia. And of course, the number of family and friends that are affected is also quite large in Canada.

The biggest risk factor for dementia is age. At about 65 years of age, the prevalence of dementia is quite low, but for every five years over the age of 65, the prevalence essentially doubles so that over the age of 90, about 40% of people have dementia. However, it's important to know that not everyone will get dementia. What's common for all of the dementias is they affect the brain enough to cause cognitive issues, thinking and memory issues for example, that are severe enough to interfere with day-to-day function.

So, the characteristics that we see are a wide range of different cognitive issues. They are usually objectively seen on some form of assessment or testing, like cognitive screening tools that might happen in a family doctor's office. And they're severe enough to cause problems with day to day function and independence.

[What are the risk factors for dementia? 2:07]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: In terms of the risks of developing dementia. We often talk about two very different types of risk factors. Non-modifiable risk factors, these are things that you can't change such as your age or genetics or your gender.

But it's been increasingly appreciated that there's a wide range of very important modifiable risk factors. These are risk factors or lifestyle factors that you can change. Things like physical activity, your diet, managing blood pressure.

Previously, it was thought that there wasn't much you could do about your risk of developing dementia. We now know that up to 45% of dementias can be prevented, or at least the risk reduced significantly, through engaging in certain important lifestyle and health behaviors. So I'm going to walk through some of the things you can do to reduce your risk of dementia.

Physical activity. Following something like Canada's 24-Hour Movement Guidelines. Being physically active has been shown to be good for your brain health and help to reduce your risk of dementia. It's also important to maintain a healthy weight.

Diet. Certain diets seem to promote brain health more than others. So, for example, the Mediterranean diet with focus on healthy foods, leafy green vegetables, legumes, nuts, less red meat, more fish as protein, there's evidence that that can also reduce your risk of dementia.

Importantly, managing high blood pressure. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is very common in Canada and can affect the blood vessels of your brain and put you at risk of dementia. Good news is, if you manage your blood pressure using medication and non-medication approaches, you can effectively reduce your risk of dementia.

Cognitive activity. Think of your brain as a muscle, staying active cognitively can be important. So do those puzzles. Get together with friends for a book club. Learn a new language. Stress yourself a little bit by doing activities that are challenging for your brain.

Social activity. It's very important to maintain social relationships. Social isolation and loneliness have actually been shown to be risk factors for dementia as well.

Hearing loss is an independent risk factor, and if you have hearing loss, you're at 90% increased risk of developing dementia versus somebody who doesn't have hearing loss. So, it's really important one prevent hearing loss in the first place by protecting your ears. If you work in a high noise environment, and if you're middle-aged, get your hearing checked. And if you do have a hearing deficit, get hearing aids. The good news is, if you do get hearing aids and improve your hearing, you can actually reduce your risk of dementia.

The last thing to say is it's never too early or too late to get started. Even engaging in some of these healthy lifestyle behaviours in late life can reduce your risk of dementia.

DISCLAIMER: The information in this video was accurate as of the upload date, 01/25/2024. This transcript has been provided for informational purposes only. They are not a substitute for advice from your own health care professional. This transcript may be reproduced for not-for-profit educational purposes only. Any other uses must be approved by the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal (info@mcmasteroptimalaging.org).