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Reducing Your Risk of Dementia

Given the demographics of Principals and Vice-Principals, there are likely many of us who have seen dementia first-hand in a parent or loved one. This may lead us to wonder whether we will experience this same condition when we get older.

There are both modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors for dementia, so let's explore what we can do to reduce our risk.

Defining Dementia

Dementia is a general term for loss of memory, language, and other cognitive processes, significant enough to interfere with daily life. Alzheimer's Disease is the most common cause of dementia. Diseases that are grouped under the term 'dementia' are caused by abnormal brain changes. The symptoms are progressive, which means cognitive impairment may start out slowly and gradually worsen over time. Signs of dementia can vary greatly, and may include challenges with:

- Short-term memory
- Keeping track of items such as keys, purse, or wallet
- Paying bills
- Planning and preparing meals
- Remembering appointments
- Travelling outside of familiar locations

Reducing Your Risk Factors

Risk factors are aspects of our lifestyle, environment, and biology that increase the likelihood of getting any disease. Risk factors are not the *cause* of the disease; instead, they represent the increased probability – not certainty – that a condition such as dementia may develop. Some risk factors can be changed, and some cannot.

Non-modifiable risk factors are those that cannot be changed or eliminated. These include:

- Aging: the chances of getting dementia increase with age
- Gender: Women are generally at a higher risk of developing Alzheimer's Disease than men
- Family history and genetics: *but take heart*, as according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, most cases of dementia are neither related to genetics nor inherited

Reducing your risk of dementia requires taking proactive steps to reduce modifiable risk factors including:

Being physically active, resulting in:

- Reduced risk of developing heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, which are all risks associated with dementia
- Reduced risk factors of high blood pressure and high cholesterol
- Increased circulation of blood, which brings nutrients and oxygen to the brain
- Reduced stress, improved mood, and overall brain health

Being socially connected:

- Regularly interacting with others has been shown to reduce the risk of developing dementia
- Being social has been proven to reduce stress, enhance mood, and reduce depression

Following a healthy diet:

- Healthy eating can reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes
- Long-term nutritious food and good hydration helps maintain brain function and slows cognitive decline
- Eat well to keep a healthy weight
- Avoid high cholesterol foods
- Reduce alcohol consumption

Taking care of the safety of your brain:

- Make safe choices to protect your brain and body from ailments and trauma that could increase your risk including:
 - o Protecting yourself from head injuries by making conscious and safe choices in the activities you do. Wear your helmet and play safe!
 - o Lowering your risk of falls
 - o Protecting your hearing when you can't avoid excessive noise. Address hearing loss issues as soon as possible and be diligent in wearing your hearing aids
 - o Reducing your exposure to air pollution
 - o Quitting smoking (or not starting) and avoiding second-hand smoke

Managing stress:

- Persistent stress can cause vascular changes and chemical imbalances that are damaging to the brain and other cells in our body; lowering our stress improves brain health
- Seek medical support for depression, anxiety, and high blood pressure

Challenging your brain:

- Cognitive activity, just like physical activity, helps reduce the risk of onset and the progression of dementia
- Challenge your brain by being a life-long learner: learn a new language, play brain-challenging games, cross-train your brain (e.g. use your non-dominant hand), or learn a new instrument.

Taking Care of Your Brain

It is never too early or too late to make lifestyle changes to benefit your brain health. Like any health concern, the earlier you are diagnosed and treatment can begin, the better the results. If you are experiencing memory difficulties or other changes in thinking skills, don't ignore them. See a physician to determine the cause, as you may have a treatable condition. Even if your symptoms do suggest dementia, early diagnosis allows a person to get the maximum benefit from available treatments.

For more information, [download this PDF](#) on risk factors from the Alzheimer's Society of Canada.

Sources:

<https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-dementia>

<https://alzheimer.ca/en/about-dementia/how-can-i-reduce-risk-dementia/risk-factors-dementia>

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/dementia>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.