

Spin-off for your brain of protecting your heart

Managing and treating vascular disease risk factors will help you not only to prevent a heart disease and stroke, but also to protect your brain from common forms of dementia, says a US scientist.



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Dr Gustavo Roman, director of the Nantz National Alzheimer Centre at the Methodist Neurological Institute in Houston, Texas, has summed up decades of dementia-related research in a review paper in a recent issue of the journal, *Alzheimer's Disease and Associated Disorders*.

Roman says that although more definitive research is needed, focusing on the most prevalent risk factors can go a long way towards helping people to reduce their risk of vascular dementia and mixed dementia (the combination of vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease).

In the US alone, it is estimated that by 2050, 11-million to 16-million Americans will suffer from some form of dementia. There are no definitive statistics of how many South Africans are likely to suffer from dementia in the future, but the incidence is climbing in this country as well.

That makes prevention programmes that much more urgent, say the experts.

Here's what to focus on controlling:

Hypertension

Controlling your blood pressure reduces the risk of stroke and heart disease. Studies are also beginning to show that hypertension increases the likelihood that people with mild cognitive impairment will eventually develop dementia later in life.

Hyperlipidemia (high bloodcholesterol)

Epidemiological studies show that in addition to cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, high blood cholesterol is also an important risk factor for dementia diseases, including Alzheimer's.

Smoking

Not only is smoking associated with increased risk of lung cancer, cardiovascular disease and emphysema, but it also adversely affects blood flow to the brain which can lead to cognitive decline and dementia.

Diabetes

Studies have already linked the obesity epidemic to an increased risk of high blood pressure, metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease, stroke, renal failure, peripheral vascular disease, obstructive sleep apnea, and type 2 diabetes mellitus. Type 2 diabetes has become epidemic in SA. People with this form of insulin-resistant diabetes are two to three times more likely to face an Alzheimer's diagnosis.

Diet and exercise

An overall healthy lifestyle is shown to decrease the risk of dementia, particularly vascular dementia, as people grow older. Here, the focus should be on a low body mass index (25 or lower), healthy diet (based on dairy, meat, fish, fruits, vegetables, cereals, low alcohol, and the ratio of monounsaturated to saturated fat), and aerobic exercise.

Hyperhomocysteinemia

Homocysteine is a natural but toxic amino acid in the blood, and high blood levels of it have been linked to an increased risk of developing Alzheimer disease. Recent UK research by scientists at Oxford University has shown that people who already exhibit signs of dementia, and who test positive for high levels of homocysteine, are more likely to respond well to large doses of B vitamins.

Research has also shown that taking large doses of B-complex vitamins can reduce the rate of brain shrinkage by half in elderly people with memory problems, and can slow the progression of dementia. Newswise

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