

Social isolation and dementia risk

Social isolation is linked with an increased risk of developing dementia.

Does social isolation increase the risk of getting dementia?

Social isolation can lead to an increased risk of developing dementia.

It relates to whether a person lives alone, and whether they see friends and family regularly or engage in social or community activities.

This is separate from loneliness – which is more to do with how someone feels about their circumstances. Loneliness has been linked to increased dementia risk.

It's difficult to know how much social isolation itself contributes to dementia risk as the link is complicated. Isolation might also occur as a

consequence of dementia. It is also linked to other risk factors such as physical inactivity and depression.

How to reduce the risk of dementia

A lifelong approach to good health is the best way to lower your risk of dementia.

There are some lifestyle behaviours with enough evidence to show that changing them will reduce your risk of dementia.

Reduce your risk of dementia

How does social isolation increase dementia risk?

Social isolation can increase a person's risk of dementia by about 60%. Studies disagree to the amount, as some studies had short follow-up time. This makes it hard to separate out whether social isolation was a risk factor or consequence of dementia.

Social isolation is related to someone's marital status as married people often have more social contact with others than single people. As studies show, lifelong single people are more likely to develop dementia than those who are married. Widowed people are also slightly more likely to develop dementia.

Social contact is significantly increased in married people, and there are other factors that may reduce the dementia risk for married people.

Married people are more likely to be healthier and have more education.

Even when accounting for these factors, social isolation is shown to increase dementia risk. There is also known to be a strong connection between high social contact later in life and memory and thinking skills.

It is not known why social isolation increases dementia risk, but one study showed how it was linked to a host of other health and social factors. Lonely people are more likely to drink heavily, smoke, not exercise and be overweight and have heart problems all of which increase dementia risk.

Social contact to reduce the risk of dementia

It is thought that social contact helps with resilience against the effects of Alzheimer's disease in the brain – known as cognitive reserve. It can also help promote healthy behaviours like exercise, and reduced stress and inflammation.

Engaging in social activities may help to build up your brain's ability to cope with disease, relieve stress and improve your mood. Examples of activities include:

- adult education or learning
- arts and crafts (especially in groups)
- playing a musical instrument or singing
- volunteering

It's important to try to keep in touch with the people who matter to you, such as friends and family. Having a conversation with someone can also exercise a wide range of your mental skills, for example:

- actively listening to and communicating with the other person
- considering the meaning of what someone is trying to tell you and how they feel
- finding the right way to express what you want to say and putting words together in the right order for someone to understand
- recalling things that have happened which are relevant to what you're talking about.

However even when accounting for these factors, social isolation is shown to increase dementia risk. There is also known to be a strong connection between high social contact later in life and memory and thinking skills.

Can interventions to boost social contact help dementia risk?

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Some research shows that people who participate in social activities are at lower risk of dementia. However most of these studies ask people to self-report about their social activities, so the cause and effect is not certain.

Trials that test interventions to boost social contact are helpful to better understand this. Some studies looked at the effect of facilitator-led group activities on memory and thinking skills. However, the trials have had mixed results, were too short, and involved too few people to know if the activities had any effect on dementia risk.