



Heart Health and Dementia Risk

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As we focus on heart health during American Heart Month (February), it's worth noting that heart health and brain health are connected. They share many risk factors. Here is a closer look at the connection between heart health and dementia.

Heart disease risk factors and dementia

Some of the risk factors for heart disease have also proven to be risk factors for Alzheimer's and other dementias, notes the [Alzheimer's Association](#). Those include conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, and high (LDL or "bad") cholesterol.

This is important, because about three out of four adults aged 60-79 have some form of heart disease. The prevalence of atherosclerosis, stroke and, heart attack increases with age, according to [Rodgers et al.](#) Prevalence rises to 86% for age 80+.

While age plays a role in cardiovascular health—and brain health—the [National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH) remind us that understanding risk factors can make a difference in our current and future health. "Leading a healthy lifestyle may help address risk factors that have been associated with dementia," they explain. Their tips for managing dementia risk include:

- Control high blood pressure
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Control blood sugar
- Eat a healthy diet
- Keep physically active
- Stay mentally active

- Stay connected with family and friends
- Treat hearing problems
- Sleep well
- Avoid or limit alcohol
- Stop tobacco use

Risk factors such as genetics are out of individual control, but the NIH says that people who practice healthy lifestyle habits "tend to have a lower risk of dementia," according to some research.

Heart attack, stroke, and dementia

Having a heart attack can accelerate cognitive decline over the years that follow, according to new research published in [JAMA Neurology](#). They say that preventing heart attacks "may be important for long-term brain health".

About one-quarter of stroke survivors also develop dementia, according to [research](#), and a majority (70%) of those instances are diagnosed as vascular dementia. The type and severity of stroke are quite variable, and thus, so is the impact on brain health. "Not all strokes result in cognitive impairment, but stroke significantly increases the risk of dementia," say the researchers.

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Heart Health and Dementia Risk *continued*

[Vascular dementia](#) is caused by injury to blood vessels, which can reduce blood flow to the brain and damage brain tissue. Narrowing of the arteries (atherosclerosis), blood clots, and other vascular conditions can impact the brain. “Symptoms of vascular dementia may develop gradually, or may become apparent after a stroke or major surgery, such as heart bypass surgery or abdominal surgery,” explains [Johns Hopkins](#).

When thinking about dementia diagnoses, keep in mind that experts increasingly recognize that many people living with dementia may actually have [mixed dementias](#). For example, the brain pathologies of Alzheimer’s disease may coexist with those of vascular dementia.

There is no doubt vascular health is linked to brain health, as the brain relies on oxygen delivery every minute. Managing chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes can go a long way in protecting wellness. Taking steps to protect cardiovascular health is good for the brain, too. For more ideas on promoting heart and vascular health, visit the [American Heart Association website](#).

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