

Dementia: a growing challenge in Australia

Dementia is now one of the leading causes of death in Australia, posing a major public health challenge. Over 433,000 Australians currently live with dementia, a number expected to increase over the next 40 years. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare projects that by 2065, more than one million Australians will be affected.

Understanding dementia and its impact

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. It is characterised by the build-up of abnormal beta-amyloid proteins (plaques) in the brain, which disrupt brain, body and immune function, and eventually cause death.

Common symptoms include memory decline, impaired thinking, poor judgement, reduced focus, language difficulties, and behavioural changes.

The potential for prevention

Although there is no cure or guaranteed prevention method, global research suggests up to 45% of dementia cases could be prevented through lifestyle and health interventions. Small, consistent daily actions can significantly reduce risk.

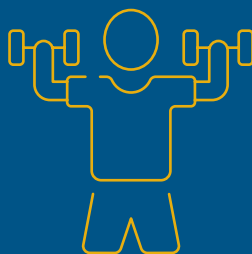
Professor Stephanie Rainey-Smith from the Alzheimer's Research Institute stresses the importance of addressing modifiable risk factors such as sleep quality, diet, and physical activity. Brain changes linked to Alzheimer's can begin about 20 years before diagnosis, highlighting the need for early and ongoing prevention.

Key risk factors and lifestyle interventions

The British Medical journal, *The Lancet* identifies 14 risk factors that, if eliminated, could prevent nearly half of dementia cases. Interestingly, five of these are diet-related: high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, excessive alcohol intake, and high LDL cholesterol.

A healthy diet is vital for memory and cognition. Examples such as the MIND (Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay) diet are associated with slower amyloid accumulation and fewer Alzheimer's signs. This diet places an emphasis on vegetables, fruits, whole grains, olive oil, beans, fish, berries, and nuts.

Reducing stress and improving gut health through probiotic and prebiotic foods or supplements may also lower dementia risk.



The role of social connection and sleep

Social isolation and loneliness increase dementia risk. Social engagement builds cognitive reserves, encourages healthy behaviours, and reduces stress and inflammation, all beneficial for brain health.

Quality sleep is critical. It supports alertness, mood, and cognition, aids memory formation, promotes new brain cell growth, and clears harmful brain toxins accumulated during the day.

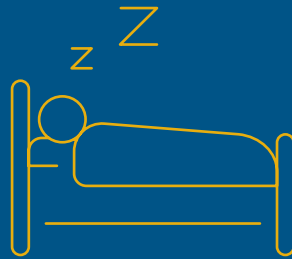
Exercise and education as protective factors

Physical exercise benefits cognition at any age by improving blood flow, lowering blood pressure, increasing nitric oxide, enhancing brain plasticity, and reducing inflammation.

Early-life education also combats dementia by increasing cognitive reserves that help the brain resist damage from plaque build-up.

Conclusion

It is never too late to adopt habits that support brain health. Focusing on diet, exercise, sleep, social engagement, and education enables individuals to reduce their dementia risk and promote cognitive longevity.



Lemon Prawn Orzo

Serves 4 | Prep 5 mins | Cook 15 mins

Ingredients list

- ▶ 1½ cup dry orzo
- ▶ 3 cup chicken/vegetable broth
- ▶ 1 tbsp olive oil
- ▶ 500g raw prawns, peeled & deveined
- ▶ ½ tsp smoked paprika
- ▶ ½ red onion, diced
- ▶ 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ▶ 2 bunch asparagus, quartered
- ▶ 2 cup frozen peas
- ▶ 2 cup baby spinach
- ▶ 1 lemon (zest & juice)
- ▶ ½ cup milk
- ▶ ¼ cup toasted slivered almonds
- ▶ 4 tbsp grated parmesan
- ▶ Optional: ¼ cup parsley, 1 tsp chilli flakes

Method

- ▶ Add orzo to broth and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cover for 10 minutes, keeping the liquid.
- ▶ Cook prawns for 2-3 mins each side in olive oil with salt, pepper, paprika; set aside.
- ▶ In same pan, lightly fry onion, garlic, asparagus 2-3 mins.
- ▶ Add orzo with liquid, milk, peas, spinach, lemon zest & juice; cook 3-5 mins.
- ▶ Remove from heat, stir in almonds, parmesan; garnish with parsley and chilli if desired.



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