

6 Healthy Lifestyle Habits That May Help Slow Memory Decline

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Some people notice changes in memory as they get older, which one study suggests you can influence by making lifestyle changes in diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol consumption, cognitive activity and social contact
- › Each factor was categorized, and statistical analysis of the raw data demonstrated that each of the individual behaviors was associated with a slower decline in memory
- › The researchers also looked at individuals with the APOE4 genotype, linked to memory decline and Alzheimer's disease, finding that those who made positive changes in at least two to three of the lifestyle factors had a slower memory decline than those who did not
- › Linoleic acid is a dietary factor that negatively influences overall health and brain health. This ubiquitous fat is the most destructive ingredient in your diet; a 2017 study found it was linked to worsening memory and learning ability in animals with Alzheimer's-type disease
- › Several more steps you might consider making to protect brain health and slow memory decline include eating more mushrooms, gaining better balance, good oral health, walking backward and steering clear of statin medications to name just a few

Research¹ published in The BMJ has found links between a healthy lifestyle and memory decline in older adults using a 10-year, population based prospective cohort study. As people get older, some notice that they have changes in memory, like forgetting where they put their keys or having trouble remembering someone's name.

For the most part, these changes don't significantly impact a person's daily life. Many people believe these are normal changes that occur with aging, and yet they don't occur in everyone. It is normal for people of all ages to forget things occasionally, but progression to mild cognitive impairment, which is an early stage of loss of memory and other cognitive abilities, is not a normal part of aging.²

The prevalence of memory decline may be increasing. In a 1993 Spanish study³ of people aged 40 years and over, researchers found the prevalence of memory impairment was 3.6%, and in individuals 65 years and older it was 7.1%. According to the CDC, a more current measurement found that 1 in 10 U.S. adults aged 45 years and older reported having memory loss.⁴

While they are similar in nature, memory decline and dementia are two distinct conditions that affect how the brain functions. However, worsening memory loss is sometimes an early sign of Alzheimer's disease,⁵ which affects an estimated 6 million Americans, 73% of which are 75 years and older. But there is hope, since data from the featured study indicates that making simple lifestyle choices can have a significant impact on your long-term brain health.

These Six Simple Steps Are Linked to Slower Memory Loss

A group of researchers from China were seeking to identify the types of lifestyle choices that might protect against memory loss as an individual ages.⁶ The researchers gathered participants aged 60 years or older from the northern, southern and western parts of China. In total, 29,072 people participated in the study. The researchers followed up with participants over a 10-year period, from 2009 to 2019.

Anyone who had a life-threatening disease, or hearing or vision loss, which are factors associated with cognitive decline, was excluded from the study. During the second phase, the people who were in Phase 1 who had available APOE genotyping, and who were not diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment or dementia, were included.

The researchers followed up with the participants four times over 10 years to look for links between memory in participants with normal cognitive function and lifestyle choices. Researchers used neuropsychological testing to identify cognitive performance at baseline, and at each follow-up during the 10-year period. Data for anyone who progressed to mild cognitive impairment or dementia was excluded in the main analysis.

The researchers analyzed six modifiable lifestyle factors, which included physical exercise, diet, alcohol, smoking, cognitive activity and social contact. In each category, individuals were ranked according to how much they participated in a particular factor. For example, people were categorized as currently smoking, never smoked or used to smoke.

After data collection, the researchers evaluated the association of each of these lifestyle factors against memory function. They found three distinct groups. Those who followed four to six of the lifestyle choices were in a favorable group, those who followed two to three were in an average group, and those who followed 0 to 1 were in the unfavorable group.

Statistical analysis of the raw data demonstrated that each of the individual behaviors was associated with a slower memory decline. After adjusting for health and socioeconomic factors, the individuals who had a healthy diet had the strongest protection against memory decline.⁷ This was followed by those who engaged in cognitive activity and then physical exercise.

The researchers began with the statement that "memory continuously declines as people age," but the rate of that decline may be affected by lifestyle factors. Age-related memory decline is not always associated with Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia. Additionally, forgetfulness in old age may "be reversed or become stable rather than progress to a pathological state."⁸

Results Were Also True for APOE4 Carriers

Factors that have been identified in past research that could affect memory include aging, chronic diseases, lifestyle patterns and the apolipoprotein (APOE) ε4 genotype.⁹ The researchers considered the APOE genotype because of its association with Alzheimer's disease. APOE4 is a specific allele of the apolipoprotein E gene.

The APOE gene is involved in the production of a protein called apolipoprotein E, which plays a role in cholesterol metabolism and lipid transportation. The APOE gene has several alleles – or slight variations in the genetic sequencing – including APOE2, APOE3 and APOE4.

It is APOE4 that's associated with an earlier and more rapid decline in memory and an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.¹⁰ People who inherit one copy of the APOE4 allele have an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and those who inherit two copies have an even higher risk.

However, the data from this study showed that while APOE4 genotype could increase your risk for developing dementia, those who carried APOE4 and had favorable or average lifestyles showed a slower memory decline as compared to those who had unfavorable lifestyles.¹¹ In other words, while the gene can increase your risk, you have some control over whether that risk is expressed by how you take care of yourself.

Diet, Linoleic Acid and Memory Decline

I have long believed and talked about the difference that you can make in your health by making simple lifestyle choices in each of these same areas: [nutrition](#), [physical exercise](#), [mental exercise](#), [smoking](#), [excessive alcohol](#) and socialization. I would also suggest that there are other simple steps you can take to protect your memory and cognition, which I'll discuss below.

But before moving further, I think we need to address one of the most destructive ingredients in your diet – linoleic acid. I take a more in-depth look at how linoleic acid destroys your health in "[Linoleic Acid – The Most Destructive Ingredient in Your Diet.](#)" But, if you don't have time, let's summarize the key points.

Fats are the primary building block of your cell membranes, which is why it's important to eat the right type of fat for your health and longevity. Vegetable and seed oils are loaded with polyunsaturated fats (PUFAs), which are chemically unstable, making them highly susceptible to damage by oxygen species that are generated during energy production in the cells.

This damage causes them to form advanced lipoxidation end (ALE) products and free radicals that damage cell membranes, proteins, mitochondria and your DNA. Even worse, PUFAs are integrated into your cell membranes, where they can remain for five to seven years.

In the article linked above I explain why seed oils are far worse than sugar and how consuming LA can have a significant impact on your overall health, including increasing your risk of memory impairment and Alzheimer's disease.

A 2017 study¹² published in Scientific Reports from Temple University concluded that replacing olive oil with canola oil (a seed oil) was not justified. However, in the press release,¹³ the researchers admitted that canola oil was linked to worsening memory and learning ability in animals with Alzheimer's disease.

Other Strategies That Can Protect Your Memory and Cognitive Health

As the featured study demonstrated, protecting your cognitive health and memory is as much a function of what you should do as it is what you shouldn't do. Let's look at some other steps you can take to help protect your memory and cognitive health.

Mushrooms — As I discuss in "[How Mushrooms Help Protect Your Brain](#)," these fungi contain ergothioneine and glutathione, also known as the "master antioxidant." Both help protect against age-related diseases like heart disease, cancer and dementia. In countries with the highest levels of ergothioneine in the diet, individuals have the lowest risk of neurodegenerative diseases.

Data show that eating more than two portions of mushrooms in a week can reduce the risk of mild cognitive impairment by a significant percentage. Be sure to choose organic mushrooms or grow your own because fungi easily absorb air and soil contaminants.

10-second balance test — This quick 10-second test is independently linked to all-cause mortality. Data also shows that if you cannot stand on one leg for 20 seconds you may have an increased risk of reduced cognitive function.

If you don't have an underlying health condition that causes vertigo or loss of balance, you can improve your balance and stability, reducing your risk of falling and taking a step toward taking care of your brain health. I share six ways to improve your balance and stability in "[Can You Pass the 10-Second Balance Test?](#)"

Address periodontal disease — Data show that periodontal disease may contribute to the development of Alzheimer's. The risk of mild cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's disease in those with [periodontal disease](#) is significantly higher than in those without periodontal disease. This underscores the importance of maintaining [good oral health](#) throughout your life.

Walking backward — A small study by researchers from London University has suggested that [walking backward could boost your memory](#). Each time participants in the study walked backward consistently, they got more test answers correct, which suggested to researchers that there's a link between time and space that is fundamental to the way our brain forms memory.

Walking backward is believed to have originated in ancient China. Today, it's also used to build muscle, improve sports performance and promote balance.

Flavonol and choline — Nutrient deficiencies can impact memory function. A large-scale study of [flavanol and epicatechin](#) supplementation demonstrated that people with a baseline flavanol deficiency experienced improvements in memory. Choline is another essential nutrient that plays a role in memory, energy and metabolism.

Choline is necessary to make acetylcholine, which is a [neurotransmitter involved in memory](#) performance. Researchers have established a relationship between high dietary choline and better cognitive performance and low choline intake has been associated with an increase in anxiety.

Magnesium threonate — Researchers have found that some people's brains shrink with age more than others, but now it's believed that increasing synapses and their density could help [prevent cognitive decline](#).

Scientists developed magnesium L-threonate in 2010, which is a patented compound with the ability to enhance working memory, short and long-term memory and learning. In 2016 they found that not only did it enhance performance, but it could reverse brain aging by more than nine years.

Avoid statins — Statins are promoted by Big Pharma to help protect against cardiovascular disease, yet they do not. People with early mild cognitive impairment and low to moderate cholesterol levels may [more than double their risk of dementia](#) when they use statin medications. The medication also contributes to a decline in metabolism in the brain's posterior cingulate cortex, which is the region that declines significantly in early Alzheimer's disease.

Shed excess body fat — Mounting evidence suggests that maintaining a healthy level of body fat and an increased level of muscle mass can affect your brain health and slow the rate of cognitive aging.

People with higher amounts of abdominal fat had lower levels of fluid intelligence with age while those with greater muscle mass were more protected against this decline. To fully understand your metabolism, and therefore the changes you can make to achieve a healthy weight see, "[Crucial Facts About Your Metabolism](#)."

Sources and References

- ^{1, 6} [The BMJ, 2023; 380](#)
- ² [Alzheimer's Association, Mild Cognitive Impairment, line 1](#)

- ³ Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry, 1993; 56(9)
- ⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, When to Talk to Your Doctor About Memory Loss, A growing problem - bullet 1
- ⁵ Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures
- ⁷ MDedge, Six Healthy Lifestyle Habits Linked to Slowed Memory Decline
- ⁸ The BMJ, 2023; 380 Introduction para 1
- ⁹ The BMJ, 2023; 380 Introduction para 2
- ¹⁰ The BMJ, 2023; 380 Comparison with other studies, para 3, 75% DTP - search "The APOE ε4 allele is reportedly correlated"
- ¹¹ MDedge, Six Healthy Lifestyle Habits Linked to Slowed Memory Decline, Page 2, section 1, under the table
- ¹² Scientific Reports, 2017;7
- ¹³ Temple University, December 7, 2017