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Playing or Enjoying Music May Help Protect Against Dementia

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | February 03, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A study of over 10,800 Australians age 70 and older found that people who always listened to music had a 39% lower risk of dementia, while those who often played an instrument had about a 35% lower risk
- Those who engaged in both listening and playing music had a 33% lower risk of dementia and a 22% lower risk of cognitive impairment
- Music activates multiple brain regions at once, including those tied to memory, movement, and emotion, making it especially useful for supporting recovery and preserving connections in dementia care
- Enjoying music at an appropriate volume encourages regular listening, helping you incorporate joyful routines into your daily life
- Joining a choir or playing an instrument also builds focus, coordination, and social connection. These factors may help keep your brain strong as you age

In the U.S., approximately 7.2 million adults aged 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia.[1] That number is expected to rise to nearly 14 million by 2060[2] if no breakthroughs emerge. Each new diagnosis means another family navigating memory loss, personality shifts, and the emotional and financial demands of caregiving.

Healthcare costs are enormous and are expected to reach $384 billion in 2025, with unpaid family care valued at over $400 billion.[3] With no cure in sight, researchers are turning to lifestyle strategies that may help delay symptoms and protect brain health. One of the areas they're recently focusing on is music.

How Does Playing an Instrument Influence Dementia Risk in Older Adults?

The connection between music and brain health is gaining scientific attention, and new evidence suggests it may be more powerful than previously thought. A study published in the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry,[4] led by researchers at Monash University in Australia, explored whether listening to music or playing an instrument could help protect against dementia and cognitive decline in people aged 70 and older.

- **Researchers studied 10,893 Australians age 70 and older —** The researchers examined data from participants enrolled in the ASPREE (ASPirin in Reducing Events in the Elderly) study and the ALSOP (ASPREE Longitudinal Study of Older Persons) sub-study. These large Australian cohorts followed older adults over time to track health outcomes. The participants were dementia-free at enrollment.

  The team collected information on the subjects' music-related habits, particularly how often they listened to music or played an instrument, and tracked cognitive health for several years. The goal was to see if these habits predicted dementia, cognitive impairment no dementia (CIND), and changes in thinking skills over time.[5]

- **Frequent music listening showed the strongest protection —** Participants who always listened to music had a 39% lower risk of developing dementia and a 17% lower risk of CIND compared to those who rarely or sometimes listened.[6] They also maintained higher scores in global cognition and memory, which are key for everyday tasks such as recalling events and making decisions. Other cognitive domains, such as attention and language, did not show improvement.

- **Playing an instrument offered benefits —** Older adults who often or always played an instrument had a 35% lower risk of dementia.[7] However, this activity was not linked to reduced CIND risk or improvements in cognitive test scores over time. Researchers suggest that while playing music may help, listening appears to have a more consistent effect on brain health.[8]

- **Combining listening and playing gave additive benefits —** Those who engaged in both listening and playing music had a 33% lower risk of dementia and a 22% lower risk of CIND.[9] Lead author Emma Jaffa, an honors student in the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University, explained:

  > *"These findings suggest music activities may be an accessible strategy for maintaining cognitive health in older adults, though causation cannot be established."*[10]

- **Education level influenced the impact of music —** The protective effects of music were most potent in participants with 16 or more years of education, while results were mixed for those with 12 to 15 years.[11] Researchers believe this may relate to cognitive reserves, the brain's ability to compensate for aging, where higher education combined with music engagement offers greater protection.

- **No improvement in perceived mental sharpness —** Despite objective gains in memory and global cognition, participants did not report feeling mentally sharper. This highlights a gap between clinical measures and personal perception, suggesting that lifestyle habits can improve brain health even if people don't notice the changes.[12]

  > *"Evidence suggests that brain aging is not just based on age and genetics but can be influenced by one's own environmental and lifestyle choices,"* senior author Professor Joanne Ryan, head of the Healthy Ageing Research Program at Monash University, said. *"Our study suggests that lifestyle-based interventions, such as listening and/or playing music, can promote cognitive health."*[13]

Here's a quick overview of the study findings, showing how everyday music habits were linked to memory and dementia risk in older adults:

Music habit	Risk reduction (%)	What this means
Listening to music most days	39% lower risk of dementia, 17% lower risk of CIND	Regular listening lowered dementia risk and slowed cognitive decline
Playing a musical instrument often	35% lower risk of dementia	Playing an instrument may support brain health, but the benefits were limited
Listening to music and playing an instrument	33% lower risk of dementia, 22% lower risk of CIND	Combining both activities showed strong protection

Dementia Isn't Just 'Getting Older'

According to the Alzheimer's Association, dementia is "a general term for loss of memory, language, problem-solving, and other thinking abilities that are severe enough to interfere with daily life."[14] It's sometimes called "senility," a term based on the outdated belief that serious mental decline is a regular part of aging. But in reality, dementia reflects disease-related changes in the brain, not aging itself.[15]

Although they're often confused for each other, dementia is not the same as Alzheimer's disease. Rather, dementia is the umbrella term for conditions that cause cognitive decline, and Alzheimer's is the most common type.

- **Alzheimer's accounts for about 60% to 80% of dementia cases —** The next most common cause is vascular dementia, which develops when blood flow to the brain is reduced due to damaged or blocked blood vessels.

Some people experience changes linked to more than one type of dementia at the same time, known as mixed dementia. Other health issues can cause memory and thinking problems that look like dementia but aren't permanent, including thyroid disorders and vitamin deficiencies.[16]

- **What happens in the brain when you have dementia —** Dementia begins when nerve cells in the brain (neurons) and their connections start breaking down. In Alzheimer's disease, this process is driven by the buildup of sticky protein deposits called plaques, as well as twisted fibers called tangles, which disrupt communication between neurons.[17]

  Over time, these changes shrink brain tissue and damage areas responsible for memory, reasoning, and language. These changes occur gradually, often taking years before symptoms appear.

- **Dementia progresses in stages —** In the early stage, people can still manage most daily tasks but may need reminders for appointments. The confusion becomes worse during the middle stage, and managing finances or cooking becomes difficult; help with dressing or bathing may be needed as well. During the late stage, independence is diminished as individuals frequently need full-time assistance with eating, using the bathroom, and moving around.[18]

- **Risk factors you should know —** Age is the most substantial risk factor, with most cases developing after the age of 65. Family history also plays a role, especially if a parent or sibling has dementia. Heart health matters too, as high blood pressure, diabetes, and smoking damage blood vessels and increase risk. Lifestyle factors such as physical inactivity, poor diet, and social isolation further raise vulnerability.[19]

Why Music Works as a Therapeutic Tool

When you listen to music, your brain lights up in several areas at once,[20] including the auditory cortex that processes sounds, the limbic system that handles emotions, and the motor cortex, which is involved with movement. This "whole-brain" activation is

powerful because most therapies only stimulate one or two regions. This is why music is gaining ground in hospitals and clinics, where it's used as a tool to not just help patients pass the time but also support healing.[21]

- **People with brain conditions often benefit the most —** In people with brain injuries or neurodegenerative diseases, music stimulates key brain regions tied to memory, emotion, movement, and speech. One powerful example comes from patients recovering from a stroke. Those who struggle to speak may be able to regain words by singing. Using melody and rhythm also helps retrain the brain's speech pathways[22] when regular speech therapy isn't enough.

- **Music quickly calms the body —** Slow, steady music can help your body relax by syncing with its natural rhythms. This gentle pace signals your parasympathetic nervous system, the part responsible for the "rest and digest" state. When that kicks in, your heart rate slows, blood pressure drops, and tense muscles start to loosen.[23]

- **Music may protect the brain in multiple ways —** A study published in Aging & Mental Health found that musicians were 64% less likely to develop mild cognitive impairment or dementia.[24] Another study published in BMC Neurology suggests this protection may come from several overlapping effects, including improved executive function and working memory, enhanced brain plasticity, sensorimotor repair, reduced stress and depression, and increased social engagement.[25]

- **Music's benefits are evident in people already living with dementia —** A study published in International Psychogeriatrics found that 39 residents in long-term care facilities in Iowa who listened to individualized music playlists experienced a significant reduction in agitation, including shouting and irritability, both during and after listening sessions. These benefits were more pronounced compared to when residents listened to generic classical relaxation music.[26]

- **The link between music and the prefrontal cortex —** Located behind the forehead, the medial prefrontal cortex is one of the last brain regions to deteriorate in Alzheimer's disease, and it is strongly activated by music. Petr Janata, Ph.D., from

the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain, mapped brain activity while people listened to familiar music and explained:[27]

> *"What seems to happen is that a piece of familiar music serves as a soundtrack for a mental movie that starts playing in our head. It calls back memories of a particular person or place, and you might all of a sudden see that person's face in your mind's eye. Now we can see the association between those two things — the music and the memories."*

- **Music deserves a place in healthy aging strategies —** Researchers from the University of Exeter believe music should be included in strategies to support healthy aging and reduce dementia risk. They recommend encouraging adults to sing, take part in community music groups, or return to instruments they played earlier in life.[28]

> *"Public health interventions to promote healthy aging and dementia risk reduction should consider including advice for adults on engaging with music … There is considerable evidence for the benefit of music group activities for individuals with dementia, and this approach could be extended as part of a healthy aging package to proactively reduce risk and promote brain health,"* they concluded.

Learn more about how music shapes your memories and protects your brain in "**Playing an Instrument, Singing May Help Preserve Brain Health**."

How to Start Building a Dementia-Friendly Music Routine

Making music part of the daily routine doesn't have to be complicated. Whether you're caring for someone with dementia or creating your own brain-supportive habits, these steps will help you build a simple, personalized music routine that fits into daily life and supports long-term well-being:

- **Make time for music every day —** This can be listening to your playlist, singing along, or playing a simple instrument. Start small and build up gradually. The goal is to make music a regular, enjoyable part of your routine so it feels familiar and comforting.[29]

- **Build a personalized playlist of favorite songs —** Start picking out favorite songs you would hum and dance to. Familiar music helps spark memories, reduce anxiety, and improve mood for people with dementia. These tunes create comfort and connection, making sessions more enjoyable and effective.[30]

- **Keep the environment calm —** Pick a quiet room with minimal distractions. Use a comfortable chair and the listening method that feels best, whether it's speakers or headphones. A quiet setting lowers stress and helps you focus on the music.[31]

- **Be considerate of the loudness —** Keep the volume comfortable and avoid sudden changes in tempo or loudness. Pausing between songs can help prevent overstimulation, while gentle pacing ensures the experience remains soothing for you.[32]

- **Get active, then get social —** When listening becomes comfortable, start with simple activities such as tapping a beat, humming, or singing along. Participating in a local singing group can also foster social connections.

- **Review weekly and make changes —** At the end of each week, look at what worked best. Which songs felt good? Was the session too long or too short? Was the room comfortable? Keep the things that helped and remove anything that caused stress. This makes your routine easier to follow and more enjoyable.

6 steps to build a music routine

1. Make time for music you love

2. Curate a playlist of your favorite songs

3. Set the mood for easy listening
4. Don't turn up the volume too much
5. Move while you listen, enjoy meeting people
6. Track what worked best for you

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4 Ways to Bring More Music into Your Life

If you already listen to music regularly, you can make it an even bigger and more meaningful part of your daily routine with these four tips:

1. Play an instrument — If you've ever wanted to learn an instrument, this is a great time to begin. Don't worry about getting it right on the first try. Start with a few chords, a simple rhythm, or a beginner keyboard app. Even simple strumming on a guitar or tapping a drum gives your brain a workout while offering a sense of accomplishment and joy.
2. **Use music to connect —** Join a choir, attend a drum circle, or simply sing with friends or family. Shared music sparks bonding hormones like oxytocin, easing feelings of isolation and boosting emotional resilience. Plus, it's fun — and fun is healing. These moments of connection can be especially meaningful for caregivers and loved ones navigating cognitive changes together.
3. **Practice mindful listening —** Instead of letting music fade into the background, choose one song and give it your full attention. Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and let the sound wash over you. This focused listening activates brain circuits that reduce stress, restore balance, and help you feel more centered and calmer — a simple ritual that can transform your day.
4. **Reset your rhythm when life feels off track —** If your sleep or energy feels out of sync, try listening to steady, rhythmic music at the same time each day, such as right after waking or before bed. Rhythm helps your brain re-establish patterns,

regulate your internal clock, and create a sense of predictability that feels comforting and grounding. Think of it as a gentle reset button for your mind and body.

Music isn't about hitting every note perfectly or remembering every lyric. It can also be about laughing when you miss a beat, sharing a song with someone else, and finding comfort in familiar melodies that bring you back to yourself. These moments nourish your brain, lift your spirit, and strengthen bonds that no diagnosis can erase. If you want to learn more about music's profound ability to heal, check out "**Harnessing the Healing Power of Music**."

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Music and Dementia

Q: Does listening to music every day lower dementia risk?

A: Yes. In a large study of adults aged 70 and older, people who always listened to music had a 39% lower risk of dementia and a 17% lower risk of cognitive impairment compared to those who didn't listen as frequently.

Q: Is playing a musical instrument protective against dementia?

A: Yes. Older adults who often played an instrument showed about a 35% lower risk of developing dementia, although the benefits for specific thinking skills were less consistent than with listening.

Q: What kind of music works best for people with Alzheimer's disease?

A: There's no single "best" genre. Music that feels familiar and emotionally meaningful tends to work best, especially songs from earlier life that can spark memories and create a sense of calm and comfort.

Q: How often should older adults listen to music for brain health?

A: The biggest benefits were seen in people who listened regularly instead of occasionally. Making music a daily habit appears more important than the length of each session.

Q: Can music help reduce agitation or sundowning in dementia?

A: Yes, it can. Studies described in the article show that personalized music listening reduced agitation, anxiety, and irritability in people with dementia, especially compared to generic background music.

Q: Does singing in a choir help memory in older adults?

A: Singing in a choir may be helpful because it combines music with social interaction, focus, and routine. Researchers highlight group music activities as a promising way to support healthy aging and cognitive resilience.

Q: Is it too late to start learning an instrument to help the brain?

A: No. Starting later in life can still be beneficial. Even simple instruments or beginner practice engage attention, coordination, and creativity, all of which support brain health.

Q: How does music affect memory centers in the brain?

A: Music activates several brain networks at once, including those tied to memory, emotion, and attention. Familiar music strongly stimulates the medial prefrontal

cortex, a region that often remains active longer in Alzheimer's disease.

Q: What's the difference between music therapy and casual listening?

A: Casual listening is informal and self-guided, like enjoying a favorite playlist at home. Music therapy is more structured and intentional, often used in care settings to support mood, behavior, or neurological recovery.

Q: Are there any risks to using music for people with dementia?

A: The main concern is overstimulation. Keeping the volume low, choosing familiar songs, avoiding sudden changes, and stopping if distress appears helps make music a beneficial and soothing experience.

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