

Dementia in Canada

In 2020, there were an estimated 597,000 Canadians living with dementia. As our aging population continues to grow, that number is predicted to rise to 955,900 by 2030. But what is “dementia”? Can anything be done to prevent its onset?

Dementia: what is it? What causes it?

“Dementia” is an umbrella term for loss of memory and other thinking abilities, as well as changes to mood and behaviour, severe enough to interfere with daily life. It is not one specific disease, but rather can occur as a result of multiple brain disorders and diseases. The most common kind of dementia is Alzheimer’s disease, accounting for 40-70% of all dementias. Other types of dementia include: vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, and front-temporal dementia. “Mixed” dementias—meaning the symptoms may be caused by more than one brain process or disease—are common.

The causes of most dementias are largely unknown. Genetics, lifestyle, aging, and background medical conditions all contribute to uncertain degrees. Some risk factors for dementia cannot be controlled—for example, increasing age is the strongest known risk factor for dementia. However, some risk factors are modifiable. It has been estimated that around 40% of dementia cases may be the result of twelve key modifiable risk factors. These risk factors are: High blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, obesity, lack of physical activity, poor diet, high alcohol consumption, low levels of cognitive engagement, depression, traumatic brain injury, hearing loss, social isolation, and air pollution.

How to help manage dementia risk

There are some basic lifestyle measures that can reduce these risks. A healthy diet (such as the Mediterranean or DASH diet) can help with high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. Regular physical activity (meaning at least 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity exercise) has positive impacts on your weight and blood pressure, as well as being protective for dementia by itself. If you currently smoke, it’s never too late to quit; you begin reducing your risk with every day you don’t smoke. If you drink more than 7 standard units of alcohol per week, then consider cutting back. Engage your brain and your social skills by picking up a new activity or hobby—like yoga, tai chi, choir, or painting, all available here on Mayne. When being active, be sure to protect your brain by avoiding falls and wearing protective gear like a helmet. The air quality on Mayne is excellent, so that’s one risk factor that doesn’t require any extra effort. And finally, if your family is always complaining they’re repeating themselves—get your hearing checked! Proper hearing aids can make sure your brain is fully engaged in the cognitive and social challenges of everyday life.

“Dementia” is a scary term, but knowing some of the risk factors behind it can help us feel empowered. Luckily for Mayne residents, the physical and social environments on this slice of paradise make it even easier to manage dementia risks.



Source: The Lancet Commission

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References:

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Alzheimer New Zealand: Reducing the risk of developing dementia (<https://alzheimers.org.nz/about-dementia/reducing-the-risk/>)