

Health research and you



Alzheimer's disease

The disease

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, a condition in which higher brain functions, including memory and understanding, deteriorate.

It is the single biggest cause of disability in older Australians, leading to problems with self-care, mobility and communication. There is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease. The risk of developing Alzheimer's disease increases dramatically with age: 6.5 per cent of Australians over 65 and 22.4 per cent of those over 85 have dementia.

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND WELFARE "AUSTRALIA'S HEALTH 2008" <http://www.aihw.gov.au/>

Why invest?

As well as reducing the quality of life for many older Australians, Alzheimer's disease creates substantial costs for the economy. Many people with moderate or severe dementia eventually require full-time care in a residential facility, which is costly to provide.

Reducing the burden of Alzheimer's disease through prevention or treatment has the potential to ease the burden on the residential care sector and generate significant savings. Access Economics has calculated that reducing the incidence of Alzheimer's disease by 5 per cent could save \$10.3 billion by 2050. More than half of these savings would be in the aged care sector.

SOURCE: ACCESS ECONOMICS "EXCEPTIONAL RETURNS" (2008) <http://www.asmr.org.au/>

Who benefits?

For years, former primary school principal Dennis Tonks, 73, had trouble remembering names. On retirement, his concentration diminished even further. It was during a shopping trip that the extent of his condition hit home. Alone, Dennis forgot completely where he was, how he got there and even where he lived.

In 2003, Dennis was diagnosed with early mild Alzheimer's disease. The diagnosis enabled him to receive medication that may, in some people, offer relief from the symptoms of dementia. So far it has proved effective.

Dennis simply couldn't function without Margaret, his loving wife of 54 years. They share good days and bad. The couple are realistic, but at the same time Margaret says "we are rapt about the research being done because it gives us some hope."

(Image of Dennis courtesy of Lynton Crabb Photography)

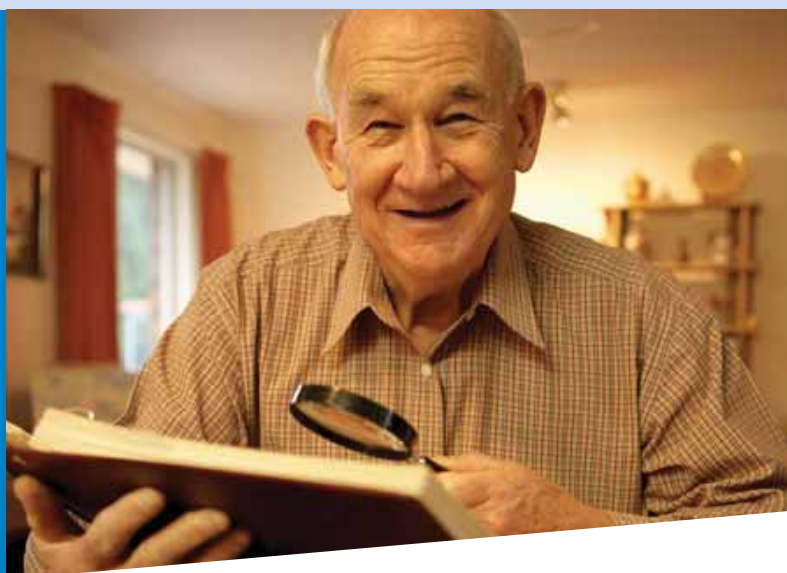
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Age is the most significant known risk factor for developing dementia, but other factors have been identified as probable risks. Quite a number of these are known risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as high blood pressure, smoking, high cholesterol and obesity. Other potential risk factors include diabetes, depression, alcoholism, severe head injury and Down's syndrome. Additionally, there appear to be some genetic factors that may predispose people to developing dementia. For example, people possessing a variant of the Apolipoprotein E gene (APOE) are at increased risk of developing dementia, as are those with a strong family history.

Making positive lifestyle choices is the best way we know of to reduce the chance of developing dementia, including:

- eating a healthy and well-balanced diet
- keeping physically active through moderate, regular exercise
- maintaining an active and interesting social life
- keeping intellectually stimulated through complex problem-solving tasks
- sleeping well
- keeping off excess weight
- keeping alcohol intake light to moderate
- doing everything possible to quit smoking
- avoiding activities that increase the risk of head injury
- keeping a regular check on blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels

Alzheimer's Australia has developed a dementia risk reduction program called **Mind your Mind**®. For more information, call the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500 or visit <http://www.alzheimers.org.au>.



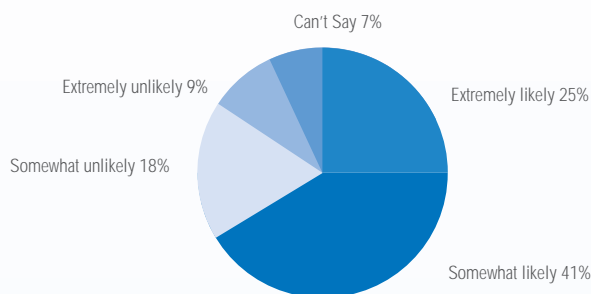
Research Australia

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Your say

Research Australia's Public Opinion Poll 2008, conducted by Crosby | Textor, found that 66 per cent of Australians would be likely to take a test for a disease such as Alzheimer's, knowing there is no current treatment.

Medical research has provided a range of scanning technologies that can identify the signs of some diseases before symptoms occur, for example the test for Alzheimer's disease. How likely or unlikely would you be to take such a test, even if you knew a treatment was not currently available for the disease?



Investment in Alzheimer's disease research

The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing has established a collaborative dementia research program with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). The Department will provide \$16 million to fund dementia research to inform policy development and improve clinical practice. The research grants are managed by the NHMRC and \$1.1 million was spent in 2007.

SOURCE: NATIONAL HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>

The Western Australian Centre for Health and Ageing is one body involved in this initiative, undertaking research into: dementia in residential care; Vitamin D and cognition; promoting healthy ageing with cognitive activity; and indigenous dementia services.

In another significant investment in research, the Australian Government has established three Dementia Collaborative Research Centres. Each centre has a particular focus. The Centre at the University of New South Wales is concentrating on assessment and better care outcomes. The Centre at the Australian National University is researching prevention, risk reduction and early detection. The Centre at the Queensland University of Technology is concentrating on consumers, carers and social research.

Alzheimer's Australia also supports research through its Research Grants Program, which funds individual scientists working at the cutting edge of Alzheimer's disease research.

New discoveries

Considerable research is ongoing world-wide to try to understand the causes of Alzheimer's disease.

The Western Australian Centre for Health and Ageing is one organisation that is piecing together the puzzle of Alzheimer's disease. The Centre's researchers are exploring novel ways to prevent and delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease and memory problems in later life. Gender, genes, medical history (strokes, high blood pressure and heart problems), ethnic background and other lifestyle factors (physical activity, diet and smoking) are examples of the areas that the Centre's researchers are currently exploring.

Another example of leading Australian research is the Australian Imaging, Biomarker and Lifestyle (AIBL) Study, a joint endeavour by the University of Melbourne; Edith Cowan University, Western Australia; Neurosciences Australia; Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria; National Ageing Research Institute; and CSIRO. AIBL is one of the largest studies into Alzheimer's disease currently being undertaken in the world. Its focus is on neuroimaging, biomarkers, neuropsychology and lifestyle interventions.

Contact us Sydney

The Exchange Centre,
20 Bridge Street, Sydney NSW 2000
T 61 2 8298 8365 F 61 2 9227 0636

Melbourne

Suite 2, Mezzanine
257 Collins Street, Melbourne VIC 3000
T 61 3 9662 9366 F 61 3 9639 4126
Research Australia Limited ABN 28 095 324 379

www.researchaustralia.org
Email enquiries@researchaustralia.org

All correspondence:
PO Box H224 Australia Square NSW 1215

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