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Be your own brain health advocate in 2025

Nearly 119 years ago, the first case of Alzheimer's disease was diagnosed by Dr. Alois Alzheimer. Today, as 10,300 Wyomingites among more than 7 million people in the U.S. and 55 million around the world struggle with the disease, not a single person has survived the diagnosis.

However, as research into Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia proceeds at a record pace, scientists have recently developed a number of lifestyle and medical approaches that can potentially reduce the risk or, hopefully, prevent the onset of Alzheimer's.

"The bad news is that age is the number one risk factor for developing Alzheimer's," said Debra Antista-Bianchi, executive director of the Alzheimer's Association of Wyoming. "The good news is that researchers believe about 40% of all cases* can be prevented or delayed. There are a number of steps that we can be taking to protect our cognitive health and, ideally, prevent this tragic disease from getting a foothold."

Following are the results of several recent research studies, presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference – the world's largest Alzheimer's research conference – that provide direction for proactive steps people can take to preserve their own cognitive health, as well as lifestyle factors (sometimes more difficult to influence) that can raise or lower risk.

- **Hearing aids slow cognitive decline** – Hearing loss is present in **65%** of adults over age 60, according to researchers. This study looked at a subgroup of older adults with hearing loss who were at higher risk for cognitive decline (about ¼ of the total study population). This study showed that those participants at highest risk for cognitive decline who utilized hearing aids and hearing counseling for three years cut their cognitive decline in half (**48%**).
- **Manage your blood pressure** – People treated by FDA-approved medications to a top (systolic) blood pressure reading of 120 instead of 140 were **19%** less likely to develop mild cognitive impairment, according to a study led by researchers at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center. Those people also had fewer signs of damage on brain scans, and there was a possible trend toward fewer cases of dementia.
- **Gut health & constipation: 16%** of the world's population struggles with constipation – more among older adults due to fiber-deficient diets, lack of exercise and the use of certain medications. Researchers found that bowel movement frequency of every 3 days or more was associated with **73%** higher odds of subjective cognitive decline and long-term health issues like inflammation, hormonal imbalances and anxiety/depression.
- **Get vaccinated** – Getting an annual flu vaccination was associated with a **40%** decrease in the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease over the next four years, according to researchers from The University of Texas' McGovern Medical School who found that even a single flu vaccination could reduce the risk of Alzheimer's by **17%**.

- **New use of opioids increases risk of death up to 10-fold in older adults with dementia** – This study of the entire population in Denmark age 65 and older diagnosed with dementia between Jan. 1, 2008, and Dec. 31, 2018, found a **fourfold** increased excess mortality risk among participants within 180 days after their first opioid prescription. Strong opioids (including morphine, oxycodone, ketobemdone, hydromorphone, pethidine, buprenorphine and fentanyl – used to relieve pain when milder medicines are not effective) were associated with a **sixfold** increased mortality risk. Among those who used fentanyl patches as their first prescription, **64.4%** died within the first 180 days compared with **6.4%** in the unexposed group.
- **Cognitive benefits of volunteering** – Volunteering later in life is associated with better cognitive function. A University of California-Davis study found that volunteering was associated with better baseline scores on tests of executive function and verbal episodic memory.
 - **University of Colorado study** – A study by University of Colorado researchers of an adult population aged 70 to 79 showed that volunteering was related to **16%** lower odds of developing dementia (**24%** lower among women). While there are benefits to remaining cognitively active through employment after the traditional retirement age, researchers noted that volunteering may provide added benefits because volunteering “is mentally and emotionally rewarding.
- **Wildfire smoke: it’s worse than you thought.** More than [42,000](#) wildfires in the U.S. in 2024 burned nearly 8 million acres of land. Now, a [10-year study](#) has shown that the smoke from those wildfires is significantly more hazardous for our cognitive health than other forms of fine particulate matter air pollution.
 - Researchers analyzed health records from more than 1.2 million socioeconomically diverse Kaiser Permanente Southern California members 60 or older. None of the members had been diagnosed with dementia at the beginning of the study. Researchers found an increased risk of dementia diagnosis due to wildfire smoke exposure, even with less exposure than to other air pollution sources.
 - Researchers noted that wildfire smoke may be more hazardous because it is produced at higher temperatures, contains a greater concentration of toxic chemicals and, on average, the particulate matter is smaller than that from other sources. This is a serious problem, as air pollution produced by wildfires now accounts for more than 70% of total fine particulate matter exposure on poor air quality days in California.
- **Bacon and sausages: all things in moderation.** People who eat about two servings a week of processed red meat have a **14%** higher risk of dementia than those who eat less than about three servings a month, according to [Harvard researchers](#). Examples of processed red meat include bacon, hot dogs and sausage. A serving equals about 2 slices of bacon or one hot dog.
 - Each additional daily serving of processed red meat was linked to an extra **1.6** years of cognitive aging for global cognition, and an extra **1.7** years of cognitive aging in verbal memory.
 - **The good news:** replacing one serving of processed red meat every day with one serving of nuts and legumes can lower the risk of dementia by about **20%**.
- **Get vaccinated (part 2)** – Getting a vaccination against pneumonia between the ages of 65 and 75 reduced Alzheimer’s risk by **up to 40%** according to a Duke University’s Social Science Research Institute study.
- **Diabetes/weight loss drugs may protect the brain too.** Liraglutide, a glucagon-like peptide drug (GLP-1), appears to slow cognitive decline and protect the brain from shrinkage, according to [Phase 2b clinical trial results](#). Researchers at London’s Imperial College studied liraglutide, a GLP-1 agonist in the same category as Ozempic and Zepbound, which have been shown to help with diabetes and weight loss and reduce the risk of heart disease.

- In the research study, the drug appeared to reduce shrinking in the parts of the brain that control memory, learning, language and decision-making by nearly **50%** compared to placebo. People in the study who received liraglutide had slower decline in cognitive function after one year compared to those who received the placebo.
- **“Ultra-processed” food might be hurting our brains.** Researchers studied more than 10,000 people over eight years and found that high consumption (defined as more than 20% of daily caloric intake) of ultra-processed foods led to a **28%** faster decline in cognitive function.
 - a. Ultra-processed foods are those that go through significant industrial processes and contain large quantities of fats, sugar, salt, artificial flavors & colors, stabilizers and or preservatives.
 - b. Examples include sodas, breakfast cereals, white bread, potato chips and frozen foods, such as lasagna, pizza, ice cream, hamburgers and fries.

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Alzheimer’s by the numbers

- More than 7 million people in the U.S. are living with Alzheimer’s or other forms of dementia in 2024 – 55 million people around the world
- About 1 person in 9 (11.3%) in the U.S. age 65 and older has Alzheimer’s dementia
- 10,300 Wyomingites are living with dementia
- Approximately two-thirds of those living with Alzheimer’s are women
- People of color are more likely to develop Alzheimer’s: Black Americans are twice as likely as whites while Hispanics are 50% more likely than whites

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**The Lancet Commission 2020 report*

<https://d.docs.live.net/35eb839928d8d4a8/Desktop/ALZ/Wyoming/New Year's resolution 12-24 - WY.docx>