

[IMAGE]

Are You At Risk For Dementia?

By Julie T. Chen, MD

My sister-in-law recently said to me that she hopes she becomes wiser as she gets older. We, most of us, wish for that, so similarly, most of us are terrified of the idea of dementia. Many of my patients ask me about how to prevent dementia. I think we use that terminology freely and frequently, so for the purpose of this article, let's first delineate what dementia actually is.

Dementia is a group of symptoms that affect your ability to think and to accomplish regular social goals. For example, just because you have some memory loss, doesn't mean you have dementia. You have to have the memory loss plus at least another loss of function such as impairment in judgment, language, or daily functioning (i.e., balancing the checkbook, paying bills).

Some common symptoms of dementia may include: memory loss, difficulty communicating, difficulty with complex tasks, difficulty with planning and organizing, difficulty with coordination and motor functions, problems with disorientation, personality changes, inability to reason, inappropriate behavior, hallucinations, paranoia, or extreme agitation.

There are some risk factors you can't change like your age and family history, but there are some risk factors that you can change.

dementia - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Those who smoke and/or drink excessive amounts of alcohol are at higher risk. Other risk factors include but are not limited to depression, high levels of female hormones, high level of homocysteine level, hypercholesterolemia, diabetes, hypertension, atherosclerosis, and obesity.

In regards to these adjustable risk factors, my recommendation is to:

- keep your weight stable and within normal range
- stick to a non-processed low sugar and low saturated fat diet that is mostly vegetable-based
- go see your doctor regularly for your health check-up so that if there is an issue, you catch it quick so you can fix it quick

- stick to regular exercise routine
- make time to sleep and relax every day
- make sure to establish a strong social support network to support a healthy mood

When it comes down to it, we all are going to get older. The question of whether we age well or not is in many ways up to us. Many people like to blame just their genes, but the truth is that our genes are strongly affected by our lifestyle.

So, if I could leave you with even just one thing to keep in mind, I want you to walk away from reading this with the thought that the best chance you have against dementia is you.

How you choose to live and what you choose to expose your body and brain has a big impact on your risk factors. In some ways, that can be very empowering. I am a big proponent of having my patients feel that sense of empowerment, because it's in that empowerment that great health changes are made.

Dr. Julie T. Chen is board-certified in internal medicine and fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, Calif. She is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations, is on several medical expert panels of Web sites and nonprofit organizations, is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines, and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates various healing modalities into her practice including, but is not limited to, medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback. To learn more, visit www.makinghealthyez.com.

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