Healthy habits may improve longevity, prevent Alzheimer's disease

May 12 2022, by Laura Hegwer

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Everyday habits that serve as the backbone of a healthy lifestyle may keep your brain sharp and help you live longer, according to new research from aging experts at RUSH.

A study recently published in the *British Medical Journal* found that people ages 65 and older who had a healthy lifestyle lived longer—3.1 years longer for women, 5.7 years longer for men—than their peers who didn't have the same healthy lifestyle. They also spent more of their remaining years without Alzheimer's disease.

What constitutes a healthy lifestyle?

In the study, participants had a high lifestyle score if they reported at least four of these five habits, or what researchers called healthy factors:

- Eating the Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurogenerative Delay (MIND) diet
- Staying engaged in cognitive activities like reading and puzzles
- Being physically active for at least 150 minutes a week
- Not smoking
- Limiting alcohol use (no more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men)

"We evaluated these lifestyle factors in combination because they may have synergistic effects on dementia risk," says Klodian Dhana, MD, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the Rush Institute for Healthy Aging and Department of Internal Medicine at Rush University Medical Center. "Previously, researchers have shown that the MIND diet, which is part of the lifestyle score, is associated with a slower cognitive decline and a lower risk for dementia." The MIND diet favors healthy fats and plants over animal-based and highly processed foods.

Excellence in aging research

This latest study builds on ongoing research from RUSH showing that lifestyle factors can potentially reduce the risk for Alzheimer's disease

and dementia by up to 60%, says Kumar Rajan, Ph.D., professor of epidemiology and director of the Rush Institute for Healthy Aging.

The research program is focused on the epidemiology of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias and draws from a longitudinal study of more than 10,000 Chicago residents known as the Chicago Health and Aging Project (CHAP). "CHAP is a biracial, population-based study with more than 60% African Americans and about 20 years of follow-up, performed in four urban Chicago communities," Rajan explains.

Researchers are trying to understand the epidemiological factors focused on biological processes, blood and neuroimaging biomarkers, and risk factors (including psychological and social determinants) that contribute to the development of dementia, he adds.

Investigating a genetic factor for Alzheimer's

In an earlier study published in Alzheimer's and Dementia, Rush researchers focused on race differences and investigated the protective role of a healthy lifestyle in African Americans and European Americans. They also tracked the apolipoprotein E4 (APOE4) allele, a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease. "African Americans are more likely than European Americans to carry the APOE4 allele," Dhana says.

In African Americans and European Americans, the researchers found that people who reported a healthier lifestyle (meaning they had at least four healthy factors like a high-quality diet, regular exercise, not smoking and only light or moderate drinking) had a slower rate of cognitive decline when compared with individuals who reported only one or no healthy factors. This was true in people with and without the genetic risk factor, APOE4 allele, Dhana says.

More information: Klodian Dhana et al, Healthy lifestyle and life

expectancy with and without Alzheimer's dementia: population based cohort study, *BMJ* (2022). DOI: 10.1136/bmj-2021-068390