

Healthy Lifestyle Habits Now May Lower Alzheimer's Risk Later

DOVER – An estimated 17,000 Delawareans age 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's disease, and that number is only expected to increase over the next several years. This represents 11% of the state's senior population. Though research is still evolving, growing evidence shows that people can reduce their risk of Alzheimer's by making key lifestyle changes, including participating in regular physical and mental activity and maintaining good heart health.


As part of National Alzheimer's Awareness Month, the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH) urges Delawareans to make lifestyle adjustments to help reduce their risk factors for Alzheimer's and dementia.

"Alzheimer's is a devastating disease that has robbed too many Delawareans of their loved ones," said DPH Director Dr. Karyl Rattay. "Between 2015 and 2025, the number of persons age 65 and older with Alzheimer's disease in Delaware is expected to increase by over 35 percent to 23,000 people. As our senior population in Delaware continues to grow, it is imperative that we address this illness. We are collaboratively working with our sister agency, the Division of Services for Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities to further educate, train and provide supports for those living with Alzheimer's or other age-related dementias."

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive disease involving parts of the brain that control thought, memory and language. It often begins with mild memory loss possibly leading to loss of the ability to carry on a conversation and respond to the environment, and can seriously affect a person's ability to

carry out activities of daily living. Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia among older adults, according to the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC). An estimated 5.8 million Americans are living with the disease. It is the fifth-leading cause of death for adults age 65 years and older, and the sixth-leading cause of death for all adults. Risk factors include aging, diabetes, high blood pressure (hypertension), smoking cigarettes and a family history of dementia.

Most people live an average of eight years after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or other age-related dementias. However, some individuals can live with a form of dementia for as many as 20 years, placing increasingly intensive demands on, and negatively affecting the health of, caregivers, which can negatively impact their income and financial security.

"We are at a very crucial time for our aging population, and as the number continues to rise, our aging population will soon outnumber all other age brackets. Our division is continuing to research best practices to learn how we can continue to evolve the way we provide optimum care for those living with Alzheimer's disease or other age-related dementias," said Dava Newnam, director of the Division of Services for Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities (DSAAPD). 

Two recent studies published earlier this year showed that actionable lifestyle changes could potentially counteract elevated risk for Alzheimer's disease. Researchers showed that participants with high genetic risk and poor health habits were about three times more likely to develop dementia versus those with low genetic risk and favorable health habits. Favorable health habits, according to the study, included healthy diet, adequate exercise, limiting alcohol and not smoking.

While there is no known cure to Alzheimer's or other age-related dementias, there are steps individuals can take to promote healthy aging and brain health:

- Get active and stay active. Becoming more physically active also reduces the chance of developing chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Heart-healthy eating includes limiting the intake of sugar and saturated fats and making sure to eat plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Manage cardiovascular risk factors such as smoking, diabetes, hypertension and obesity. If you need help quitting tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, call the Delaware Quitline at 1-866-409-1858.
- Learn new things and challenge yourself mentally with puzzles and games.
- Connect with family, friends and communities.
- Protect your head: "Fall-proof" your home, use a helmet when participating in sports, and wear a seat belt to protect your head in the event of a car crash.

In addition, DPH recommends all Delawareans follow the 5-2-1 Almost None concept: eating at least five servings of fruit or vegetables a day, watching no more than two hours of recreational screen time daily, getting one or more hours of physical activity each day, and drinking almost no sugar-sweetened drinks. For additional resources and tips to achieve a healthier, balanced life, visit <https://www.healthylife.org>.

DSAPPD looks at ways it can approach care holistically in addition to medicinal therapies. Earlier this year, the division, in partnership with the Alzheimer's Association of Delaware Valley, the University of Delaware and Delaware State

University, launched the Delaware Center for Alzheimer's and Related Dementias (DECARD), www.decard.org. This website is a virtual hub of information to provide additional supports for individuals who are recently diagnosed, caregivers, or medical professionals. The site is expected to evolve as more is learned about Alzheimer's disease and other age-related dementias.

"The wellness of the caregiver or caregivers is just as important as the person diagnosed with Alzheimer's or other age-related dementias," said Newnam. "A Stanford University study found that 40% of caregivers who care for a person with Alzheimer's or other age-related dementias will pass away before the person diagnosed. In Delaware, we have Caregiver Resource Centers located all throughout the state. These sites can provide additional resources and supports, such as the Savvy Caregiver Program for the caregiver and the family unit. The work we do is not just for the person diagnosed, but also for the caregiver."

To find aging and disability services in Delaware, contact the Delaware Aging and Disability Resource Center at 1-800-223-9074 weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. or visit <http://delawareadrc.com/>. For more information about Alzheimer's disease and services in Delaware, visit <https://alz.org/delval>, https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dsaapd/alzheimers_toolkit.html, or www.decard.org.

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A person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind or speech-disabled can call the DPH phone number above by using TTY services. Dial 7-1-1 or 800-232-5460 to type your conversation to a relay operator, who reads your conversation to a hearing person at DPH. The relay operator types the hearing person's spoken words back to the TTY user. To learn more about TTY availability in Delaware, visit <http://delawarerelay.com>.

The Delaware Department of Health and Social Services is committed to improving the quality of the lives of Delaware's citizens by promoting health and well-being, fostering self-sufficiency, and protecting vulnerable populations. DPH, a division of DHSS, urges Delawareans to make healthier choices with the 5-2-1 Almost None campaign: eat 5 or more fruits and vegetables each day, have no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time each day (includes TV, computer, gaming), get 1 or more hours of physical activity each day, and drink almost no sugary beverages.