

Conversations Around Brain Health: Reframing Expectations for Healthcare Providers, Patients, and Caregivers



There are many steps you can take to keep your body healthy as you get older, but have you ever taken the time to think about your brain and whether it's healthy? Have you talked to your healthcare provider about brain health? You probably haven't, but maybe you should. A recent survey found that 82 percent of people in the US say that they or someone close to them have struggled with at least one condition related to brain health, such as depression or dementia. Maybe you're thinking, "I'm too young to worry about my memory," but approximately 10 percent of people in the US 45 years of age or older have subjective cognitive decline, which is self-reported confusion or memory loss that may be a risk factor or even an early sign of Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.

Unfortunately, not many people who experience subjective cognitive decline talk about it. In fact, fewer than 50 percent of adults reported that they had discussed confusion or memory loss with a healthcare provider. Of course, even the thought of cognitive decline or dementia can be frightening. No one wants to consider a future where they lose their memory, are unable to recognize their loved ones, and can't take care of themselves. But there is good news. It's never too early to improve your brain health, and there are steps that you can take now to reduce the risk of cognitive decline and dementia.

Research has shown that there are several modifiable risk factors that are at least partially responsible for around 40% of all cases of Alzheimer's disease and dementia. These risk factors include less education; less cognitive stimulation; hearing loss; vision loss; traumatic brain injury, including concussion; high blood pressure; physical inactivity; diabetes; cardiovascular risk factors; high alcohol consumption; obesity; smoking; depression; social isolation; air pollutants; poor sleep; and diet. So, what can you do to take control over your brain health?

If you have hearing loss, for example, use hearing aids. Hearing loss is associated with cognitive decline in people who don't use hearing aids. It's also important to be engaged in social activities; social contact is recognized as a factor that protects against cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease. The Alzheimer's Association, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to advocacy, research, risk reduction, and early detection, also recommends 10 things you can do in your everyday life.

- Challenge your brain by doing something new. Learn a new skill or try something artistic.
- Continue your education. Take a class at a local library or online to stimulate your brain.
- Get regular exercise. Find ways to build more activity into your day.
- Protect your head. Wear a helmet for biking and use a seatbelt when you're in a car.
- Quit smoking.
- Control your blood pressure. Talk to your provider about diet, exercise, and medications, if necessary, to keep your blood pressure under control.
- Manage diabetes. Just like blood pressure, talk to your provider about diet, exercise, and medications.
- Eat healthier foods. Include more vegetables and leaner meats in your diet and avoid processed foods.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Several of the other lifestyle changes, such as physical activity and diet, can help you control your weight.
- Get better sleep. Stay off screens before bed and minimize sleep disruption as much as possible. If you think you have any sleep-related disorders, such as sleep apnea, talk to your provider.

You may be uncomfortable starting a conversation about brain health with your healthcare provider whether you have specific concerns about your memory or not, and that's okay. Some people feel that

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it's the provider's responsibility to start the discussion. Others feel embarrassed or ashamed because of the stigma that still exists around cognitive difficulties and Alzheimer's disease. However, your brain health is too important to wait for your provider to bring up the topic. Why? Because, unfortunately, many providers are also uncomfortable talking about brain health and cognitive concerns!

So, start a conversation with your provider about brain health and any specific cognitive concerns you may have today. You might want to ask about lifestyle changes you can make to reduce your risk of cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease, or about symptoms related to normal aging versus early signs of Alzheimer's disease. These are hard topics to bring up, but they are vitally important. If you or someone you know is ready to talk to a healthcare provider about brain health and cognitive decline, take a look through the resources provided with this whiteboard. Find out questions to ask, how to start the conversation, how to be involved in the decision-making process, and even where to go to find support groups. Don't wait. Discussing brain health now could help you or someone you love live life to the fullest.

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