

2026 edition



A straightforward guide to brain health

How to boost your brainpower and
protect your memory



A service provided by



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Latest research

Getting older can often mean becoming more forgetful, but the latest medical research shows that there are lots of things we can all be doing to boost our brainpower and reduce our risk of dementia. In 2024, researchers identified 14 separate factors that affect the way our brains age which are not linked to our inherited genes.

This guide looks at ways small lifestyle changes can address some of these factors and help protect our brains. While these changes may help reduce the risk of dementia, they cannot prevent it completely, and some people will still develop dementia despite doing all the right things.

If you are worried about your memory, we have also suggested next steps in seeking help, and how you can make life easier with simple strategies.

14 risk factors for dementia



Hearing impairment

Get regular hearing checks and use a hearing aid.



Failing eyesight

Get regular eye tests and treat conditions early.



Obesity

Eat well and keep active.



High blood pressure

Speak to your GP about how to manage your blood pressure.



High cholesterol

Get regular checks and stick to a healthy diet.



Diabetes

Control blood sugar.



Smoking

Find out more about support available to help you stop smoking.



Excessive alcohol consumption

Limit drinking to 14 units per week.



Physical inactivity

Find an exercise you enjoy.



Depression

Stay connected and talk to your GP about treatments.



Social isolation

Keep connected with friends and join local activities.



Education

Less time in education can be a risk factor, but you can keep challenging your brain at any age.



Air pollution

Check pollution levels in your area and try and limit exposure if you can.



Traumatic brain injury

Wear protective headgear and avoid injuries.

The importance of hearing

Hearing loss is one of the most common health challenges as we grow older, yet many people are surprised to learn that it is also one of the strongest risk factors for dementia. Research shows a very clear link between untreated hearing loss and increased cognitive decline. Understanding why this link exists - and what we can do about it - can make a significant difference to our long-term brain health.

How hearing loss affects the brain

Risk factor: Hearing loss



It's thought there are three ways in which hearing loss can affect the brain.

Firstly, when hearing becomes difficult, the brain has to work harder to process sound. Over time, this strain may contribute to memory problems.

Secondly, people with hearing loss often withdraw from conversations because conversation becomes exhausting. This can lead to loneliness and social isolation, which are themselves risk factors for developing dementia. (See page 8.)

Thirdly, studies using brain imaging have shown that untreated hearing loss is linked to faster shrinkage in the parts of the brain responsible for sound and memory. It suggests that hearing loss may have a more direct biological effect on the brain than previously thought, although researchers continue to explore this area.

What can you do?

Make sure you get a regular hearing test. They are quick, painless, and often free through NHS services, high-street audiologists, or community clinics. If you're over 50, consider them part of routine health checks.

Don't worry if you need hearing aids. Modern hearing aids are discreet, comfortable and highly effective. Research shows that people who use hearing aids experience up to a 50% slower rate of cognitive decline compared with those who leave hearing loss untreated.



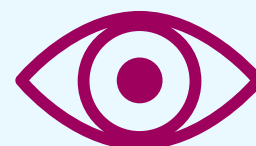
Eyesight matters

Having your eyesight checked regularly is important for more than just clear vision. It may also help reduce the risk of problems with memory and thinking as we get older.

Our eyes and brain work closely together. What we see is processed by the brain, so when vision is poor, the brain has to work harder to understand what's going on. This extra effort can be tiring and may make it harder to concentrate or remember things. Simple issues like needing stronger glasses can make everyday tasks more difficult if left uncorrected.

Risk factor:

- **Failing eyesight**



Poor eyesight can also affect how active and social we are. If driving or recognising faces becomes difficult, people may start to avoid these activities.

Over time, this can lead to spending more time alone and being less active. Both loneliness and reduced activity are linked to a higher risk of cognitive decline.

Eye tests can pick up problems such as cataracts, glaucoma or macular degeneration. Early treatment can help slow down vision loss and make day-to-day life easier. Eye checks can also sometimes spot signs of other health conditions, like diabetes or high blood pressure, which can affect brain health if not managed.

The good news is that eye tests are quick, painless, and easy to arrange. Updating your glasses or treating eye problems can help you stay independent, confident, and mentally active.



Did you know that you are entitled to free eye tests once you turn 60?
You may also qualify for vouchers to put towards the cost of glasses.
Speak to your NHS registered optician to find out more.

Healthy heart = healthy brain

Did you know that healthy lifestyle choices help both the heart and the brain because they are closely connected? The heart pumps blood to the brain, so when the heart is strong, the brain gets plenty of oxygen and nutrients to work properly.

Most of us know what a 'healthy lifestyle' should be! A balanced diet with lots of fruit and vegetables, no smoking or drinking and plenty of exercise. But it's not always easy to achieve.

However, there is lots of help on hand to help improve our overall health - which is good news for our brains.

Below are some ideas about simple steps to take.

Book your heart MOT

If you don't have a pre-existing health condition and are between the ages of 40 and 74, you are entitled to a free NHS Health Check with a practice nurse or healthcare assistant every five years. They will check your blood pressure, cholesterol, height and weight, and may also look at your blood sugar level.

They will also chat to you about how much exercise you do and how much you smoke and drink. Find out if you are due a check, and make an appointment.



Keep numbers in check

Sometimes blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol levels can be managed with lifestyle changes, but some people will need medication. Try to make sure these conditions are well controlled and that your medication is reviewed regularly.

Risk factors:

- **Obesity**
- **High blood pressure**
- **High cholesterol**
- **Diabetes**
- **Smoking**
- **Excessive alcohol consumption**



Get support where you need it

If you are aware that your diet isn't great, or you're smoking or drinking too much, one of our Memory Advisers can talk through useful first steps to make a change. The NHS offers a whole range of programmes to help you with lifestyle changes, so you could also look online or book an appointment with your GP or practice nurse.

Keep moving, keep smiling

Exercise is not only good for the body — it is very important for keeping the brain healthy as we get older. Regular movement helps the brain work better and can reduce the risk of memory problems.

Risk factors:

- **Physical inactivity**
- **Depression**



Being active increases blood flow to the brain. This helps deliver the oxygen and nutrients the brain needs to stay sharp. Exercise can support memory, attention and thinking skills, and may help slow down age-related mental decline.

Exercise is also good for mood and mental wellbeing. It can reduce stress, anxiety and low mood, all of which can affect memory and concentration.

Staying active can improve sleep, and good sleep is important for brain health.

The key is to move regularly and choose activities you enjoy. Even small amounts of exercise can help keep the brain active, support independence, and improve quality of life.

There is no need to join a gym or train for a marathon. Try and weave exercise into your daily life with a brisk walk or taking the stairs instead of the lift whenever you can. If mobility is a challenge, remember that chair-based and adapted exercise can be equally valuable.



Simple ways to stay active:

- Go for a regular walk, outdoors if possible.
- Try gentle chair-based or standing exercises.
- Do light strength exercises using household items.
- Practice balance exercises to improve confidence.
- Take part in group activities or classes for older adults.



Stay connected

Interacting with other people is known to be great for our brain health. There are many ways to make sure we get enough social contact each week. Many free or low-cost activities are available through libraries, community groups and local charities.

Below are just some ideas. You can also use websites such as Live Well Oxfordshire to find out more about what's on offer in your local area.

Join community groups

Local activity clubs and faith communities provide regular opportunities to meet people with shared interests.

Attend classes or workshops

Learning a new skill can be daunting at any age, but it's great for your brain and a lovely way to connect with others who are local.

Volunteer

Helping at charities, libraries, schools or community centres can be a great way to meet others, while doing something worthwhile at the same time.

Use technology to stay in touch

Video calls, messaging apps and social media can help maintain relationships with family and friends, especially those far away. Age UK Oxfordshire or your local library may be able to help with getting you online.

Join an exercise class

Keeping fit in the company of others can be much more fun than exercising alone and has a huge range of benefits. Look for classes that are specifically designed for older adults. Sometimes the first class is free, so you can see if you enjoy it before committing.

Find out more

Age UK Oxfordshire organises lots of social groups. Our team of advisers will be able to signpost you to activities that you might enjoy.

Risk factor:

- **Social isolation**



Learn and challenge

The current research lists a low level of early education as a risk factor for memory issues in later life. Clearly, this isn't something that we can do anything about when we are older. However, there is increasing evidence that continuing to give your brain a good 'workout' can keep your memory stronger for longer. There are lots of ways to do this and the good news is that it's not expensive to challenge your brain!

Learn something new

Look out for workshops and classes to join and challenge your brain to learn something new.

Check for activities and talks at the local library. Your local U3A may also offer courses or one-off events.

Brain games

If you have a tablet or smartphone, seek out apps and websites with brain training games. Prefer pen and paper? Free local papers and magazines often contain puzzles such as crosswords and sudokus.

Commit to culture

New research suggests that engaging in arts and culture can have a positive effect on the brain. This could be a visit to a local museum or simply picking up a book. If you find it hard to get out and about, Oxfordshire Libraries offer a home delivery service.

Risk factor:

- **Low level of education**



Become a dancing queen (or king)

Did you know that moving your body to music is great for your wellbeing and stimulates your brain?

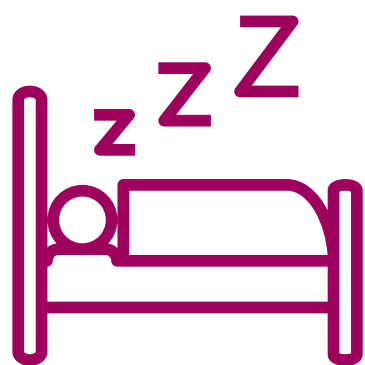
The effect is greater if you have to remember sequences of steps, as in ballroom dancing or line dancing, but dancing in the kitchen to the radio will also give your brain and mood a boost!

Making life easier

As we get older, it's very normal to become more forgetful. Many people will say that by the time they get upstairs, they've forgotten why they went up!

It's also not uncommon to find it harder to pick up new skills, especially when it comes to using technology. There are often a lot of new words and concepts to learn, and this can take more time as we get older as many of the processes are unfamiliar.

Some people find their memory is sharper at a particular time of day - so it makes sense to plan more difficult tasks for this time if possible. Almost everyone finds it easier concentrate with fewer distractions, so if you've got something tricky to do, reduce stress by eliminating background noise.



You may find it helpful to make sure you're getting enough sleep too. A well rested brain is more able to cope with new information. Seven to nine hours is generally recommended for adults.

However, if problems with your memory are affecting everyday life, or you are finding it hard to carry out a familiar sequence of tasks, it is a good idea to talk to your GP and ask them to refer you to our Memory Support Service.

What our Memory Experts say:

“Keep doing what you can. It’s really important that, even if you find it hard, you keep trying. Ask for support and encouragement from those around you, rather than letting them do everything.”

Keep a diary

- Make sure you note important dates on a calendar or in a diary and be sure to check it regularly.
- A whiteboard with daily reminders can be useful.

Small steps

- Break complicated tasks down into small steps and focus on one step at a time.
- Write out step-by-step instructions for things you find difficult, such as using a new mobile phone.

Staying safe

- If you're finding it difficult to make financial decisions, speak to someone you trust to help you sort out your finances.
- Check out services for your phone that can filter out nuisance calls.

Name games

Names are often hard to remember, so try to make a memory game to help. You could use rhyming words - such as Carer Sarah - or adjectives that start with the same letter - like Smiley Sunita.

Getting extra help

Noticing changes in your memory can feel worrying, but raising concerns with your GP is a positive and sensible first step. Memory appointments are very common, and GPs are experienced in exploring them calmly and thoroughly.

What might happen at a GP appointment

Your appointment will usually begin with a conversation about what you've noticed, for example, forgetting names or appointments, misplacing items or struggling to concentrate. The GP will ask when the changes started, whether they've changed over time, and how they're affecting daily life. You may find it helpful to use the symptom chart overleaf for a couple of weeks so that you can take it along to the appointment.

To understand possible causes, the GP will ask about your general health, mood, sleep, stress levels, medical conditions and any medications you take. Many things can affect memory, including anxiety, low mood, poor sleep, vitamin deficiencies or medication side effects - and many of these are treatable.

You may be asked to complete a short, simple memory or thinking test. These are not exams and there's no "pass" or "fail"; they just help build a clearer picture. The GP might also check your blood pressure or arrange blood tests to rule out common causes.

The GP may then offer reassurance, practical advice, treatment for an underlying issue or arrange follow-up. Sometimes they'll refer you to a specialist memory clinic for further assessment. This does not mean you have a diagnosis of dementia or mild cognitive impairment. You can also ask them to refer you to our Memory Support Service.



Frequently asked questions

What does MCI mean?

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is a condition where a person experiences more memory or thinking difficulties than would normally be expected with ageing, but these changes are not severe enough to significantly affect everyday independence. People with MCI may find themselves forgetting appointments, misplacing items more often, struggling to find the right words or having difficulty concentrating and making decisions.

MCI is not the same as dementia. Individuals with MCI can usually manage their daily activities, work and personal care without assistance, although they may notice occasional challenges.

Will I be able to drive if I am diagnosed with memory problems?

If you have a diagnosis of dementia, you are required to tell the DVLA so your driving can be assessed. However, if you have been diagnosed with MCI there is no requirement to notify the DVLA unless your memory issues are having an effect on your driving.

It's a good idea to chat with family and friends and ask them to let you know if they notice changes.



If I am referred to a memory clinic, what tests will they do?

A memory clinic assessment is designed to find out the cause of memory or thinking difficulties. There is no single test for memory problems, so specialists use a combination of assessments.

The appointment usually includes a detailed discussion about symptoms, medical history, medications and how memory problems are affecting daily life.

Cognitive tests are commonly used to assess memory, attention, language, problem-solving and awareness of time and place. These may involve answering questions, remembering words, drawing shapes or completing simple tasks.

Blood tests are often arranged to rule out other causes of memory difficulties, such as vitamin deficiencies, thyroid problems, diabetes or infections. Some people may also be offered a brain scan, such as a CT or MRI scan, to help identify changes.

Symptom chart

This may be a helpful way to record symptoms. It may help you to spot patterns in the day and it can be shared with professionals such as your GP. Try to record symptoms for at least two weeks, and keep it as factual as possible.

The row in orange is an example of what you might write.

When did symptom/memory lapse happen? Date and time.	What happened?	What happened just beforehand, and who was there?	What happened immediately afterwards?	Was there anything that was helpful?
Tuesday lunchtime	Got lost in supermarket	Had driven to supermarket without a problem	Became upset	Had a cup of tea and something to eat

Notes

Notes

How to contact us

Our specialist team of advisers can support you with your memory concerns. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you need information, advice or support.

You can reach us on our Support Line, open from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Support Line: 01865 410 210

You can also ask your GP to refer you to our Memory Support Service.

Want to know more about the wider work of Dementia Oxfordshire? Take a look at our website www.dementiaoxfordshire.org.uk

If you would like to know more about other services offered by Age UK Oxfordshire, including:

- exercise classes
- social groups and activities
- scams prevention
- digital support

call **0345 450 1276** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/oxfordshire



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This booklet has been co-produced with help from our Memory Experts, people who are themselves living with memory challenges.



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