

A Brain Health Plan

Screening is only part of a provider's responsibility, however. Education and guidance are also crucial.

Many patients feel they have no control over whether they will get dementia in the mistaken belief that it's determined entirely by genetics. In fact, modifiable factors determine up to 40% of whether a patient gets dementia and half of cases are potentially preventable. This gives providers an opportunity to practice proactive brain care.

These efforts should begin early. Dementia is a concern primarily of senior citizens, but it shouldn't be. Those with dementia typically have the disease 15 years before showing symptoms. Physicians should not wait for patients to enter their 50s or 60s before raising the subject of prevention.

They can help patients prevent and delay dementia with a brain health plan built around lifestyle recommendations that have been proven to help. These include:

Eating healthier. This includes a heavily plant-based, if not vegetarian, diet; drinking five to eight cups of water a day; and controlling weight.

Daily movement. The relationship between physical activity and mental acuity is strong. Aerobics, strength training and mind-body exercises help sharpen the mind. An ideal beginning weekly regimen would consist of at least two hours of aerobic exercise, two 30-minute sessions of strength training, and 30 minutes of mind-body exercises like yoga or tai-chi.

Ongoing learning. Education should never stop. It's good for its own sake and it can prevent mental decline. This can include everything from reading and doing crossword puzzles to new experiences, including travel.

Good rest. Seven to eight hours of restful sleep is important. Patients can help log those hours by reducing caffeine and alcohol intake, avoiding large meals within two hours of bedtime, sleeping in cooler temperatures, and avoiding phones, laptops, and TVs before going to bed.

Staying healthy. Overall good health through weight control, exercise, not smoking and managing blood pressure and blood sugar can help prevent and delay dementia.

Mental health. Stress, depression and anxiety can harm brain health if untreated. It is important to get necessary treatment, such as therapy and antidepressants for serious cases, and to practice meditation, mindfulness and deep breathing.

Having a purpose. Having a reason to get out of bed can keep patients mentally sharp. This can include work, volunteering or faith.

Building a village. Isolation and loneliness contribute to mental decline. People should make an effort to stay in touch with family and friends. Joining a club or group of people with similar interests can also help.

All these practices should sound familiar because they're also the blueprint for living longer, healthier, happier lives and for preventing diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. The sooner patients are able to take these steps, the more effect they will have.

By integrating brain health into primary care and offering the latest dementia screening, education and prevention recommendations, PCPs can greatly benefit their patients.

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