

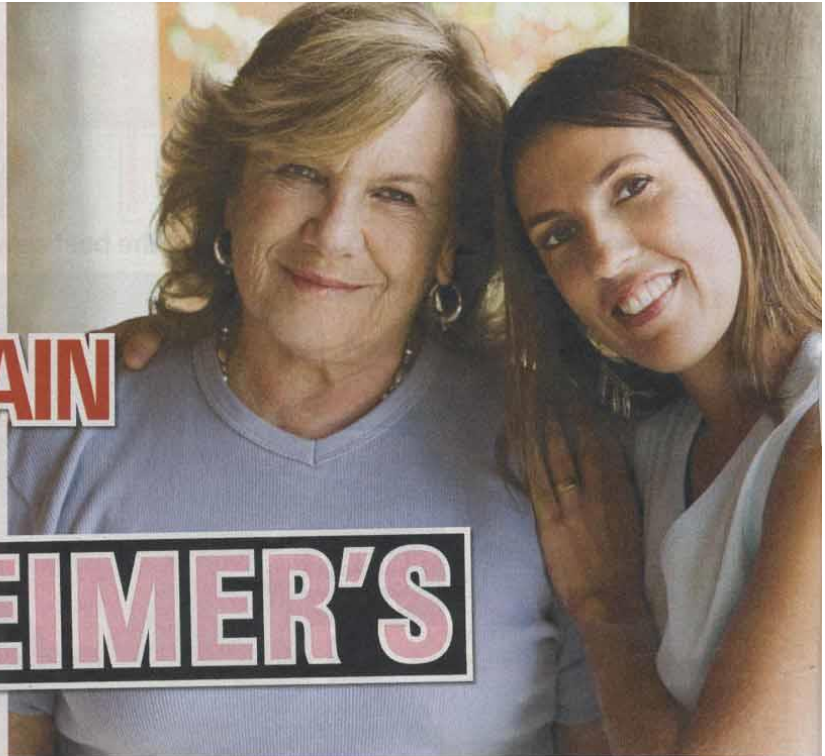
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OVER  
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**\* health**

# HOW TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN AGAINST

# ALZHEIMER'S



DEMENTIA IS OFTEN THE DISEASE OLDER PEOPLE FEAR THE MOST, BUT NOW EXPERTS SAY THERE ARE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDUCE YOUR RISK OF DEVELOPING IT...

## WHAT IS ALZHEIMER'S?

● Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia – a term that's used to cover a range of degenerative brain disorders.

● Symptoms include memory loss, confusion and problems with communication and understanding. People with Alzheimer's become increasingly deficient in vital brain chemicals and their brain cells begin to die off.

● Over time, the brain becomes increasingly damaged and symptoms worsen. In the later stages, many dementia sufferers have to be cared for in a nursing home.

● For more information see [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk) or call 0845 300 0336, Mon-Fri, 8:30am-6:30pm.

Words: Lynne Hyland. Picture: Alamy.

**W**e all hope that our later years will be a golden time when we can look back on a long and happy life. Sadly, many people are robbed of their memories by the cruel disease of dementia. More than 700,000 people in the UK have dementia, and millions more suffer the agony of watching their loved ones' consciousness fading away, many existing only in a state of living death. Yet there is growing evidence to suggest Alzheimer's, a common form of dementia, is a potentially preventable disease. Taking a few steps earlier in life may help protect the brain for the years ahead, dispelling the myth that dementia is something that simply 'happens' with age. 'Alzheimer's is not an inevitability,' says nutrition expert Professor Patrick Holford. 'Only one in a hundred cases are caused by genes, so it's very likely that the majority can be avoided through diet and lifestyle measures.' Professor Holford explains the primary risk factor for Alzheimer's is high levels of an amino acid called homocysteine, also strongly linked to stroke and heart attack. In itself homocysteine is not a problem, but it needs B vitamins to convert it into substances the body can use for brain and immune health. If B vitamins are lacking, homocysteine builds up to harmful levels. 'We have known for many years that people with Alzheimer's usually have abnormally high homocysteine levels,' he says. 'Now the evidence strongly suggests that homocysteine is not just a marker for the disease but a cause, something that directly damages the brain.' B vitamins help stop homocysteine accumulating and also lower raised levels. 'The question now is at what stage the disease can be prevented, halted or improved through nutrition,' Professor Holford says. 'Trials in the Netherlands and at Oxford University are looking at the effects of B vitamins on people with Alzheimer's and age-related memory loss, but we need to make people aware of what they can do now to protect themselves.'

## THE SEVEN-STEP BRAIN-S

### ONE CHECK YOUR HOMO-CYSTEINE LEVELS

If you are concerned about your memory, the first step is to test your homocysteine. 'Unfortunately, few doctors will measure homocysteine levels, but you can get a very accurate home version from York Test (£75, 0800 458 2052, [www.yorktest.com](http://www.yorktest.com)),' says Professor Holford. A healthy H score is under 7, higher scores are linked to impaired mental performance. Anyone above 15 has a raised risk of Alzheimer's.

### TWO GET YOUR B VITAMINS

To keep your mind sharp and homocysteine levels low, Professor Holford advises eating a variety of foods rich in B vitamins, such as B6, B12 and folic acid. The best sources are wholefoods, such as leafy greens (especially rich in folic acid) and beans. He also advises taking a daily multi-nutrient with at least 20mg vitamin B6, 10mg B12 and 250mg folic acid. If you've been diagnosed with high homocysteine levels, he recommends using a targeted formula such as Higher Nature H Factors, from £14.90 (call 0800 458 4747).



### THREE EAT OMEGA 3

A recent study on people aged 64-95 discovered that eating fish, particularly the oily variety, such as salmon, mackerel and sardines, significantly reduced the risk of developing Alzheimer's. The theory is that the essential omega-3 fats found in oily fish help reduce the brain inflammation associated with Alzheimer's, which can harm brain cells. Aim to eat two portions of oily fish a week, or take a purified omega-3 supplement.



## THE DRUGS DON'T WORK?

The standard treatment for Alzheimer's is Aricept, a drug that slows the disease's progression by boosting levels of the brain's key memory neurotransmitter. Controversially, the National Institute For Health & Clinical Excellence ruled that the drug could only be prescribed for moderate to severe symptoms, and not during the early stages.

'The problem is that Aricept only helps about a third of sufferers,' explains Professor Holford. 'It is also only a stop-gap drug – although it can help the remaining brain cells to communicate more efficiently, it doesn't stop them dying off. After two or three years it will usually stop working, and people who've taken Aricept are then no better off than those who haven't.' However, the Alzheimer's Society continues to campaign for wider access to drug treatment, because of the improved quality of life they offer to some sufferers.

'THERE'S GROWING EVIDENCE THAT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE CAN BE AVOIDED THROUGH DIET AND LIFESTYLE MEASURES'



## SAVING PLAN

### FOUR

#### FEAST ON SMART FATS

Professor Holford advises eating eggs, which are rich in phospholipids, the so-called 'smart fats'. Choose the omega-3-enriched versions, such as Columbus eggs, for an extra bonus. Lecithin granules are another good source of phospholipids – try sprinkling a dessert-spoonful on cereal.



### FIVE

#### BOOST ANTI-OXIDANTS

Another characteristic of Alzheimer's is a rise in free radicals – unstable molecules that harm brain cells. Free radicals make it harder for B vitamins to convert homocysteine into useful substances. Antioxidants help neutralise these brain attackers. They're found in lots of fruit and vegetables, so eat them in a rainbow of colours and take a high-strength daily multi-vitamin.

### SIX

#### KEEP YOUR BRAIN ACTIVE

The picture isn't all bleak – you can build new brain cells at any age. Mentally-active elderly people can maintain normal brain function throughout their life. Researchers have found that keeping the mind active reduces the risk of mental decline – activities with a proven brain-sharpening effect include reading, playing cards and board games, doing puzzles, such as Sudoku, and even a spot of dancing.



### SEVEN

#### KEEP YOUR BODY FIT

Mind and body work together, so regular exercise can help keep your brain fit too. Exercise reduces stress, a risk factor for Alzheimer's, and also boosts blood and oxygen flow to the brain. This may reduce the risk of the vascular form of dementia, caused by poor circulation to the brain. Finally, exercise also reduces the risk of obesity, which is linked to Alzheimer's.

\* The brain-saving plan is adapted from *New Optimum Nutrition For The Mind* by Patrick Holford, Piatkus, £14.99. Celebs On Sunday readers can buy it for £12.99 including free p&p (UK mainland only) by calling 01476 541 001 and quoting Celebs On Sunday.