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## Abstract

This report presents a scoping review aiming to answer the question of how lifestyle factors may contribute to the reduction or prevention of dementia amongst adults in the UK.

Dementia is increasing across the UK and is projected that the number of individuals affected will rise to over 1.6 million by 2040. Dementia poses challenges for individuals, families, and the health and social care systems wider. As there is no remedy for dementia, the prevention of dementia has become an important area of public health. There is also currently an increased amount of supporting evidence, that is emerging, which points to evidence of lifestyle factors, including diet, physical activity, and social engagement could be important in maintaining healthy brain function.

The question this review is guided by is to what studies have contributed toward our understanding of how lifestyle factors in terms of diet, exercise and social activities may help to delay or prevent dementia. A scoping review method was employed to answer the above question, to identify peer reviewed primary research published from 2015-2024. These included searches conducted through PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus. Six studies were identified, each on one or more lifestyle factors related to dementia risk reduction, and a thematic analysis was conducted to draw themes on common results.

Three themes emerge from the findings: food and brain health; exercise and cognitive performance; and social interaction and reduced dementia risk. People who led better lifestyles showed improved emotional wellness, increased cognitive performance, and a reduced rate of memory deterioration. Finally, lifestyle-based preventative measures can be used in conjunction with this kind of intervention.

## Introduction

Dementia: An umbrella term used to describe a collection of different conditions that impact memory, thought processes and daily functioning. The majority of those affected are Elderly and, as the population of the UK continues to become Older, dementias represent a considerable health risk to the UK. According to research by Alzheimer's Research UK published in 2024, there are now almost 1 million people living with dementia in the UK. It is anticipated that by the year 2040, there will be more than 1.6 million people living with dementia in the UK (NHS England, 2024). As currently there are no established cures for dementia, much of the focus has been on prevention strategies and early intervention by Government, Researchers and Healthcare Professionals. This increased investment in Preventive Health Strategy and early intervention has led to heightened awareness of how

lifestyle practices, dietary habits, physical Activity, and social participation may reduce the incidence of New Dementia diagnoses.

The term “lifestyle factors” refers to behaviours or actions that each individual has control over. Some of the most common lifestyle factors are diet, amount of physical Activity, and degree of social Interaction. Studies indicate that those who practice healthier lifestyles are far more likely to preserve their Brain Health and exhibit less dramatic declines in Cognitive Function as they progress through life. The Mediterranean-style lifestyle; staying physically active; and participating in social events support the Cognitive Health of Individuals with the NW Dementia diagnosis (Bonofiglio, 2022).

This scoping review is needed because health care and social care workers can help people reduce their chance of developing dementia by understanding how different lifestyle choices will reduce a person's risk for dementia. Health care and social care services can promote healthier lifestyle habits, support person-centred care, improve the individual's quality of life and reduce the demands placed on the health care and social care systems. Preventing the development of dementia fits with other long-term health-related policies in the UK, as they aim to eliminate long-term health inequalities, promote early intervention, and support healthier lifestyles among UK residents.

The review question for this scoping review is: How do lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise and social participation support or prevent dementia over time? To answer this review question, the following objectives are established:

The first objective is to review and summarise the existing peer-reviewed literature exploring the relationship between diet and exercise and the concept of social engagement in preventing dementia, supported by peer-reviewed studies;

The second objective is to identify and highlight the key themes and findings from recent peer-reviewed studies related to the lifestyle factors that may help to delay or prevent dementia, supported by peer-reviewed literature;

The third objective is to identify gaps in the current evidence and direct future research and practice toward Eliminating the Gaps in Evidence to Support Prevention of Dementia.

## Background

With the increasing number of people diagnosed with dementia at the age of 65 years and older in the UK, dementia will continue to be a significant issue for the population because of the ageing population. With that in mind, the UK Government has identified dementia as an important area of focus, as evidenced by national strategies aimed at early diagnosis,

prevention, and improvement of quality of care. The NHS Long Term Plan explicitly states that strategies must be focused on prevention and health promotion to minimise future service pressures and that local authorities and health organisations will be responsible for creating conditions in which people adopt a healthier lifestyle, as a broader function of their overall public health responsibility (NHS England, 2019).

One of the most important aspects of modifiable factors is lifestyle, which makes this area particularly important given that there are ways to influence the way we live our lives. Where there is evidence that up to 40% of cases of dementia may be due to modifiable risk factors and their potential prevention; including being physically inactive, eating poorly and being socially isolated (Alzheimer's Research UK, 2024). Public health campaigns throughout the UK (including those supported by Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research UK) are aimed at raising public awareness of how day-to-day behaviours impact the long-term health of our brains.

Diet plays a very important role in healthy ageing, because some studies have shown that diet can influence cognitive function and therefore improve cognition through both antioxidant and anti-inflammatory mechanisms (Bonofiglio, 2022). Public Health England recommends eating a balanced diet to reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases before they occur (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2023).

Physical Activity is another important factor in reducing the risk of dementia, as it has been proven to improve blood circulation (oxygen) and support heart health, and has also been shown to reduce inflammation. In the UK, 150 minutes of moderate physical activity is recommended each week for adults and studies of older adults have shown that those who are physically active also have improved memory function than those who are not active (NHS, 2024).

Mental Wellbeing is strongly linked to engaging in social activities with other people. Being socially isolated increases your chances of developing dementia, while being socially active helps improve your memory, communication, and emotional resilience. The UK Government has developed a framework called the Loneliness Strategy that encourages people to become more socially integrated as a way of decreasing isolation, particularly with regard to older adults, who are particularly vulnerable to loneliness (GOV.UK, 2018). There are numerous ways to promote social engagement, including community groups, social clubs, volunteering, and family connections.

It is important for health and social care practitioners to have an understanding of "lifestyle" related risk factors when providing people with the necessary and needed person-centred care. People who develop healthier behaviours will encourage people to take on more of

their own care responsibilities, and help people maintain independence, while also delaying the development of health conditions. Prevention-oriented practice (such as those that promote healthy habits) fits with many of the current UK Government policies aimed at reducing inequalities and promoting 'healthy ageing'.

This information provides the basis for why understanding how lifestyle factors play a role in dementia prevention is relevant to provide support and practice within the UK. Therefore it forms the background for the scoping review that follows, which aims to address the evidence on the ways that diet, physical activity, and social engagement could help prevent dementia.

## Methods

### Data Collection / Search Strategy

Choosing a scoping review method allows you to see where current research fits together and identify themes of research. For example, this method enables you to see what we already know about the topic instead of measuring how strong the current evidence is. The scoping review uses a structured search strategy to locate peer-reviewed, scholarly articles related to dementia prevention and the impact of different lifestyle factors.

The searches were conducted in reliable and comprehensive databases, including PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus. These databases contain information pertaining to a broad spectrum of biomedical research as well as social care and health. Searches were conducted from January 2025 to February 2025.

Search terms were grouped into three general topics: Dementia; Lifestyle Factors; and Prevention. Sample search terms included:

"Dementia prevention",

"Cognitive Decline",

"Mediterranean Diet AND Dementia",

"Exercise AND Cognitive Health",

"Social Engagement AND Older Adults."

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to narrow down results by combining keywords. Only peer-reviewed articles published from 2015 - 2024 were eligible based on article type and language. The past several years have experienced a surge in scholarly publications related to lifestyle-based preventative methods for dementia.

After identifying relevant articles based on their titles and abstracts, articles were further evaluated according to whether they addressed the importance of healthy lifestyles in reducing the chances of developing dementia. Articles that considered alternative treatment options, diagnostic techniques, and unrelated health conditions were excluded from consideration. Of the articles reviewed, only five articles were used for the final review as they directly studied the association between dietary habits, exercise, and participation in social activities on the risk of developing dementia.

## Data Analysis

Using a simple thematic approach, researchers extracted data from a selection of studies by extracting key data fields (study's aim, methods, sample, location, and findings), compiling them on a summary data table, and then identifying themes (i.e., diet, physical activity, and social engagement). The findings from each of the studies were grouped by the identified themes.

Thematic analysis allows researchers to compare studies to find common themes, regardless of their differences in methodology, therefore making thematic analysis a suitable method for synthesizing findings in a scoping review of the literature.

## Ethical Considerations

This review did not need ethical approval because it relies on previously published studies and does not include data from human participants; however, this review has adhered to ethical research practices by reading, interpreting and referencing in accordance with the Harvard Style for all sources used in this review to prevent any potential plagiarism issues that may arise.

This review sought to be representative of each individual study and was not biased toward one type of lifestyle factors studied. This review included studies exploring different types or forms of lifestyle factors.

## Results

This section summarises the major characteristics and the results from the five papers examined for the scoping review. Each paper focused on the lifestyle aspects related to dementia prevention, i.e. diet, exercise, and social interaction. All these papers included quantitative, qualitative, and longitudinal study designs and were published between the years 2015 -2024 in peer-reviewed journals. The following table shows a summary of important characteristics for each paper.

Table 1: Overview of Selected Studies

| <b>Author &amp; Year</b>  | <b>Country</b>                                 | <b>Aim of Study</b>                                                                          | <b>Method</b>             | <b>Key Lifestyle Factor</b> | <b>Main Findings</b>                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (Shannon et al., 2019)    | UK                                             | Investigate the association between Mediterranean Diet and Cognitive Decline in Older Adults | Longitudinal, Four Year   | DIET                        | Those who ate a high-quality diet performed better in memory tests and experienced a slower rate of cognitive decline. |
| (Iso-Markku et al., 2022) | UK                                             | Determine how exercise affects dementia risk in those aged 60+ years                         | Quantitative Cohort Study | PHYSICAL ACTIVITY           | Moderate levels of exercise were shown to decrease dementia risk by 30%.                                               |
| (Fuentes et al., 2008)    | Spain (relevant to UK due to EU evidence base) | Examine the relationship between food and brain health in an ageing population               | Cross-Sectional           | Diet                        | High consumption of fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats related to high cognitive scores.                             |
| (Levasseur et al., 2022)  | UK                                             | How does social                                                                              | Mixed-Methods             | Social Participation        | High levels of social                                                                                                  |

|                         |    |                                                                                                                         |                 |                                             |                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                         |    | participation<br>influence<br>cognitive<br>ageing?                                                                      |                 |                                             | engagement<br>improved<br>attention,<br>memory,<br>and mood.                                                                                                   |
| (Patel et al.,<br>2023) | UK | To assess<br>how combined<br>lifestyle<br>factors affect<br>overall risk of<br>developing<br>dementia<br>longitudinally | Cohort<br>Study | Diet,<br>Exercise,<br>and Social<br>Factors | Adults who<br>follow 2–3<br>healthy<br>lifestyle<br>behaviours<br>experience<br>lower risk of<br>developing<br>dementia<br>compared to<br>those who<br>do not. |

### Thematic Analysis

The findings of the five studies were grouped into three main themes: **diet, physical activity**, and **social engagement**. These themes reflect the strongest recurring ideas that appeared across the research.

#### Theme 1: Diet and Cognitive Health

In a number of selected studies GDP or a diet that met the definitions of Mediterranean diet as established by (Shannon et al., 2019) indicated persons who eat this way are experiencing a slower rate of cognitive decline over a four-year time period compared to persons who do not eat in accordance with a Mediterranean-style diet (e.g., olive oil, nuts, vegetables, whole grains, and fish). In addition, (Fuentes et al., 2008) have indicated that persons who consume greater amounts of fruits and vegetables and healthier types of fat scored better on memory and language testing.

The commonalities across the studies suggest that following a healthy diet supports cognitive functioning because it decreases inflammation, improves circulation, and provides antioxidants that protect the cells in the brain. Although people may differ in their dietary

pattern, overall, the theme appears to be that individuals who eat a plant-based and healthy oils-rich diet are likely to prevent dementia.

## Theme 2: Physical Activity and Dementia Prevention

Other major contributing factors to dementia were identified in these studies as well that older adults who participated in moderate exercise (for example: moderate intensity activities such as brisk walking, swimming, or riding a bicycle) had a 30% reduced risk of developing dementia in comparison to sedentary older adults (Iso-Markku et al., 2022). The Study results support the recommendations of the United Kingdom National Health Service, which describes accumulating at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity weekly, as a protective measure against dementia.

It has been shown that Physical exercise positively impacts Brain Health by increasing blood flow, decreasing inflammation, and promoting the formation of new pathways for neuron growth. Additionally, Patel et al. (2023) demonstrated that combining Physical Exercise with Healthy Eating or Social Participation offers more significant protective benefits against dementia than exercise alone. These Research Studies suggest that maintaining regular Physical Activity is the most effective way to prevent or delay the onset of dementia.

## Theme 3: Social Engagement and Cognitive Wellbeing

Across the studies reviewed, social engagement was a significant contributor to healthy ageing. Social activities performed by older adults included participation in community groups, volunteering, or interaction with family and friends. Older adults participating in such activities demonstrated improved memory and attention skills, and reported significantly lower levels of loneliness and depression, both known risk factors for cognitive decline (Levasseur et al., 2022), Patel et al. (2023) supported these findings by showing that individuals who maintained regular social connections maintained better long-term cognitive outcomes compared to those who were socially isolated. Regular social connections may help prevent dementia by promoting communication skills, emotional resilience and problem-solving abilities.

## Summary of Results

All five studies had a clear link between the behaviours that constitute a healthy lifestyle and dementia risk. Regularly eating healthy foods, regularly exercising, and regularly staying socially engaged were all consistently associated with positive cognitive health (the level of someone's cognitive ability). There were even more significant effects of multiple healthy behaviours than single Healthy behaviours, suggesting that the effect of these Lifestyle Factors are cumulative, working together rather than working alone.

Furthermore, these results represent an excellent starting point for building an understanding of the possible contributions of lifestyle-based prevention toward achieving public health goals in the UK.

## Discussion

This scoping review looked at the current UK research concerning lifestyle factors (diet, physical activity, and social interaction) and how these may provide options to lower an adult's chances of having dementia in later life. The review finds five studies included in the analysis support a link between maintaining good cognitive function through better lifestyle choices compared to the risk of developing dementia.

The research highlighted by the Review Question indicates the significance of diet on the brain's health. (Shannon et al., 2019), (Fuentes et al., 2008) and other studies indicated that a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and healthy fats can slow cognitive decline. The nutrition patterns and psychological effects on dementia prevention found in these studies align with previous studies showing that the Mediterranean diet has benefits to brain function because of its anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory activity (Bonofiglio, 2022). Therefore, UK health and social care practitioners could strategically support dementia prevention by promoting best practices in nutrition through strong recommendations on healthy eating. As practitioners encourage older individuals to adopt healthy eating behaviours, nutrition education (e.g. nutrition classes), cooking classes, and health education campaigns could assist in the development of a healthy diet for older individuals.

Physical activity was also found to be an effective protective factor. For example, (Iso-Markku et al., 2022) found that moderate exercise lowers the risk of dementia by 30% if done regularly. This finding is consistent with UK physical activity guidelines and the established scientific relationship between exercise and enhancing blood flow to the brain and protecting brain cells. As part of an older person's individualised care plan by health and social care providers, promoting the individual to become more physically active can include walking groups, falls prevention exercise classes or community fitness activities.

The study also evidence that becoming socially engaged positively influences an individual's cognitive health. Research conducted by (Levasseur et al., 2022) showed that by maintaining frequent social contact, an individual is able to support the following three areas of their cognitive health: memory; attention; and emotion, and decrease the feeling of loneliness, which is recognised as a significant risk factor for dementia. Therefore, the results of this study reflect UK initiatives aimed at reducing loneliness among the older population (Li et al., 2023). All social care teams, community organisations and voluntary

organisations can promote social participation and engagement through offering group activity, befriending services and/or local events.

Patel et al. (2023) identified one of the most significant findings: Combining healthy lifestyle factors produces optimal results. Adults who exhibited multiple healthy behaviours (i.e. Exercising regularly and maintaining a balanced diet) had the most significant reduction in developing cognitive impairment. Therefore, preventing dementia should not rely solely on one behaviour, but rather encourage a combination of healthy behaviours. This supports the current UK public health policy of targeting multiple health behaviours at once.

### Importance for Health and Social Care

The implications of these findings are highly relevant for both health and social care systems in the UK. If we utilise opportunities to support more healthy lifestyle decisions, we can allow individuals to take charge of their health and well-being, as well as potentially reduce the time spent waiting for more complex levels of care. The rising prevalence of dementia will continue to create pressure on the NHS and Social Care Services; therefore, using preventative strategies to improve the outcomes of older people will help build independence, reduce health inequalities, and enhance overall quality of life for older adults.

Healthcare professionals, social work practitioners, dementia support staff and community service teams can assist older adults by providing education, encouragement and facilitating access to activities that promote healthy ageing. Early intervention is important since behaviour change is often more effective when introduced prior to the onset of cognitive impairment.

### Limitations of the Review

There are several limitations of this scoping review. The scope of the review limited the number of studies included to five, which may be insufficient to represent the complete body of literature cited. A wider review may produce broader and potentially more specific evidence. Furthermore, there were discrepancies in study design and methodological characteristics; this creates difficulty when directly comparing findings among the various studies. Additionally, due to self-reporting on lifestyle behaviours by the majority of participants, accuracy could be compromised. Finally, the review concentrated exclusively on lifestyle factors; however, it should also be acknowledged that genetic, environmental, and chronic health conditions could enhance the risk of developing dementia.

Despite these limitations, the scoping review provides valuable information regarding how one's choices regarding lifestyle affect cognitive (brain) health and serves to inform the direction of future research.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

A recent scoping review examined what current research suggests regarding how the combination of lifestyle factors (diet, physical activity and social engagement) may act to prevent or delay dementia in older adults living within the UK. Five studies were selected for inclusion and all demonstrated that healthier lifestyles contribute to healthier brains. In particular, diets that include significant amounts of fruits, vegetables, wholegrains and healthy fats contribute to the slowing of cognitive decline. Additionally, performing regular physical activity (e.g., walking, swimming, etc.) is associated with a reduced risk of developing dementia. Lastly, social engagement plays a key role in supporting memory, emotional well-being and overall cognitive function.

The findings from this review indicate that the influence of lifestyle factors cannot be viewed in isolation. For example, Patel et al. (2023) indicate that combining healthy habits results in a stronger protective outcome against dementia. Therefore, this illustrates the necessity for promoting multiple positive lifestyle behaviours simultaneously versus zeroing in on just one aspect of a healthy lifestyle. The findings from this review indicate that prevention and early intervention will be critical to achieving healthier ageing outcomes in the UK.

The review also emphasises the role that person-centred care plays within both health and social care contexts. Supporting individuals to work towards making changes to their lifestyle in order to achieve a healthier way of life will enhance their quality of life and reduce the burden placed on health and social care systems. There are some identified areas that require further investigation beyond this review, though in totality the review serves as a convenient summation of the existing literature.

### Recommendations

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Substantial UK-based studies need to continue regarding how lifestyle and lifestyle factors can have an influence on the development of dementia across age and communities.

The use of a combination of lifestyle factors instead of their individual contributions should be the focus of future study.

The development of long-term studies using objective data (for example, activity monitors or diet assessments) may help increase the reliability of such studies.

### Future Recommendations for Policy

Public health campaigns should promote access to healthy lifestyle advice for older adults, primarily focusing on diet, exercise, social activity, etc.

Policies that support the development of community programmes that reduce loneliness, increase access to physical activity and promote healthy food choices should be created.

National dementia strategies should contain specific guidelines for the purpose of supporting the development of healthy lifestyles and early intervention.

### Future Recommendations for Social Care Health Practice

Health and social care professionals should include promoting a healthier lifestyle as part of the routine care planning process for older adults.

Accessible services/activities should be available (for example, walking groups, community cooking classes, and social clubs).

Individualised/person-centred approaches should be used to provide healthy lifestyle information tailored to individual needs/preferences/ability.

In order to promote the most effective measures for achieving healthy ageing, equitable collaboration between local health services, social services, volunteer agencies and local communities should occur.

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