

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

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Can Food Prevent Dementia?

Recently, the first "Baby Boomer" became eligible for Social Security benefits. It's difficult to imagine that the massive demographic of people born in the two decades after World War II is entering their Golden Years. As this shift occurs, it's evident to holistic health-care providers like Dr. Stevenson that now, more than ever, older adults are determined to remain active and vital.



Fear of any type of cognitive decline, especially dementia, often outpaces concerns about other types of disability. While we can expect some health changes as we get older, dementia is neither normal nor inevitable. Dr. Stevenson wants patients to know that there are simple steps they can take now to ward off memory problems later.

What Is Dementia?

Dementia is defined as the loss of intellectual faculties, including memory, which interrupts social and occupational functioning. Dementia may be sparked by vascular problems, which curtail blood flow to the brain. Other culprits include brain trauma or injury — even if it occurred several years prior to the onset of memory loss.

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the best-known type of dementia; it involves the disruption of normal brain cell function. Two hallmarks of AD are abnormal amounts of protein plaques and tangles within the brain. These

usually affect brain regions responsible for learning and memory first.

The good news is that a large amount of research shows that certain dietary factors can determine whether the brain stays healthy in old age — or not (*J Nutri Health Aging* 2006;10:386).

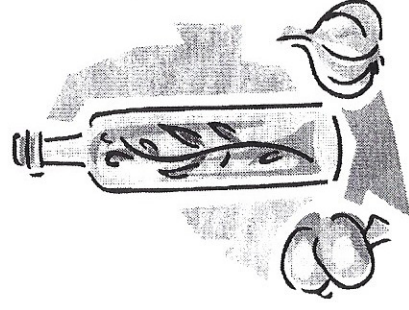
Go Mediterranean

Dietary choices for maintaining cognitive wellbeing may seem obvious, because they are often the same choices that ward off other diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and cancer.

The optimal ratio of lean protein (particularly from fish), legumes, fruits, vegetables and monounsaturated fat, mostly in the form of olive oil, makes up what is popularly termed the Mediterranean diet. Other characteristics of this way of eating include low consumption of dairy foods, red meat and eggs.

Dr. Stevenson teaches patients that the Mediterranean diet is linked with a vast array of health advantages, including warding off dementia.

When researchers looked at health effects of the Mediterranean diet, they found a reduced risk of AD. The diet also slowed the progression of the disease in people who had already been diagnosed with AD. Lower mortality rates from AD were also noted. Stricter adherence to the Mediterra-



mean diet brought down mortality rates even more (*Neurology* 2007;69:1084).

Keep Up the Variety

As an individual grows older, his or her food choices often become limited. This can negatively skew nutritional intake. One study found a direct correlation between eating a more diverse diet and superior nutritional status. Researchers suggest widening the variety of foods available to older adults in order to prevent health complications of all types later in life (*J Am Diet Assoc* 2002;102:1096-104). The study also determined that limited food choice correlates with an increased danger of developing health issues.

Specifically, the study found that eating lots of foods that are easily converted to energy, along with protein, increases the ingestion of vitamins D, B2, B6 and a host of other important B vitamins (*J Nutri Sci Vitaminol* 2004;50:184-95). B vitamins have long been associated with cognitive function. You can find plenty of B vitamins in foods like salmon, beef, eggs, peanuts, broccoli, asparagus, red peppers, spinach and romaine lettuce.