

# Caregiver Quick Reference Guide

May 2010

Vol. 1 Issue 1



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## Vascular Disease & Dementia: What's the Link?

- Conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart problems & high cholesterol may cause or increase damage to the body's vascular system or blood vessels.<sup>1</sup>
- A growing body of evidence suggests that the health of the brain — one of the body's most highly vascular organs — may be closely linked to the overall health of the heart and blood vessels.<sup>1</sup>
- Observational studies have found that both vascular and Alzheimer's dementia are more common in patients with Type 2 diabetes mellitus. Persistent high blood sugar appears to play an important role in brain dysfunction.<sup>2</sup>
- Emerging data suggest that management of cardiovascular risk factors, such as high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, smoking, obesity and physical inactivity may help avoid or delay cognitive decline.<sup>1</sup>



### How to Reach Us

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## A Brief Message from the Director:

Thank you for allowing us to work in your communities. We hope that the research we are doing will benefit caregivers now and in the future. In response to your enlightening questions and concerns, as well as requests for additional information on certain topics, we have developed this quick reference guide that we hope will be of great assistance to caregivers and families in your community.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to create programs and resources that help older adults and their caregivers.

Sincerely,

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Interim Co-Director, UNC Institute on Aging  
Professor, Health Policy and Management  
UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health

## Possible Risk Factors for Dementia:

### Things We Can't Control

- Age
- Genetics

### Things We Can Control

- Head Injury
- Physical Activity
- Diet
- Chronic Diseases

- *Age is the most important risk factor for Alzheimer's disease. The risk of developing Alzheimer's doubles every 5 years after age 65.*<sup>3</sup>
- *Genetic links to early-onset and late-onset, the two forms of Alzheimer's, have been identified.*<sup>3</sup>
- *Research studies have found associations between physical activity and improved cognitive skills or reduced Alzheimer's disease risk.*<sup>3</sup>
- *A nutritious diet, rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and low in fat and added sugar, can reduce the risk of many chronic diseases, including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and obesity. Studies are being conducted to examine whether a healthy diet can also help preserve cognitive function or even reduce Alzheimer's disease risk.*<sup>3</sup>
- *Several common chronic diseases that affect older people, including heart disease, stroke, hypertension, and Type 2 diabetes, also affect the body's vascular system and have been tied to declines in cognitive function or increased Alzheimer's disease risk.*<sup>3</sup>

## A Helpline to Help You!

1-800-272-3900

National Alzheimer's Association  
24-hour Helpline



- Some studies have looked at the effects of active smoking on the brain. A few early reports associated active smoking with beneficial effects or even a reduced risk of dementia.<sup>4</sup>
- However, more recent evidence clearly suggests that active smoking has neurotoxic effects and is associated with approximately a doubling in dementia risk for older adults.<sup>4</sup>
- Although nicotine may potentially aid in increasing reaction time, learning and memory, smoking increases cardiovascular risk and cardiovascular risk factors have been linked to increased risk of dementia.<sup>5</sup>
- Due to these elevated risks, smoking cessation becomes increasingly important, particularly for those aged 65 and older.



- No treatment is available to slow or stop the deterioration of brain cells in Alzheimer's disease.<sup>1</sup>
- However, some of the health and lifestyle practices good for a healthy body may make a difference in brain aging. Managing risk factors to decrease the likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease could help reduce the cognitive decline associated with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.<sup>1</sup>
- More limited data suggest that a low-fat diet rich in fruits and vegetables, a healthy social network, and a lifetime of intellectual curiosity and mental stimulation may support brain health.<sup>1</sup>

## Tips to Maintain Health of your Body- and Possibly Your Brain<sup>6</sup>

### Eat wisely!

- A lowfat, low-cholesterol diet is advisable for almost everyone. There is growing evidence that a diet rich in dark vegetables and fruits, which contain antioxidants, may be beneficial.

### Stay physically active!

- Physical exercise helps maintain good blood flow and is associated with reduced risk for chronic disease.

### Manage chronic diseases!

- See your doctor regularly and have your blood pressure and blood sugar checked. Take prescribed medicines regularly to keep your conditions under control.

Keep mentally active & socially engaged!

**References:** 1. National Alzheimer's Association. 2010 Report: Facts & Figures. 2. Seaquist E. (2010). The Final Frontier: How Does Diabetes Affect the Brain? *Diabetes*. 55(1):4-5. 3. US DHHS. National Institutes of Health. National Institute on Aging. April 2009 Publication: Can Alzheimer's Disease Be Prevented? 4. Barnes, D. et al. (2010). Secondhand Smoke, Vascular Disease, and Dementia Incidence: Findings From the Cardiovascular Health Cognition Study. *American Journal of Epidemiology*. 171(3):292-302. 5. Peters R. et al. (2008). Smoking, Dementia, and Cognitive Decline in the Elderly, A Systematic Review. *BMC Geriatrics*. 8(36):1-7. 6. National Alzheimer's Association. 2010. Brain Health. Retrieved from [http://www.alz.org/we\\_can\\_help\\_brain\\_health\\_maintain\\_your\\_brain.asp](http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_brain_health_maintain_your_brain.asp).



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