

other physical activities do not—factors that may account for its benefits.

The U.S. Surgeon General and the American College of Sports Medicine recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days of the week to stay healthy. And for people who like to exercise more, all the better: A report by the Institute of Medicine says about 60 minutes of activity a day on most days of the week helps adults maintain a healthy body weight.

**Smoking.** Smokers are at greater risk for mental decline than nonsmokers, and smoking cessation may reduce this risk. One study showed that current smokers over age 65 were 3.7 times more likely to experience mental decline over a one-year period than people who did not smoke or smoked only in the past. In addition, a 2003 article from the *American Journal of Public Health* showed that people who quit smoking between ages 43 and 53 were more likely to experience cognitive decline than nonsmokers; however, quitters were less likely to experience mental decline than those who continued to smoke, indicating that quitting may attenuate some of the increased risk of dementia. Smoking may impair mental function by damaging the blood vessels that supply nutrients to the brain.

**Alcohol consumption.** Heavy alcohol consumption can interfere with proper memory function, but people who drink moderately have a lower risk of mental decline and Alzheimer's disease than nondrinkers.

In research published in 2003 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, investigators reported that people who drank one to six alcoholic beverages a week had a 54% lower risk of dementia than people who never drank. People who drank less often (less than once weekly) or more often (7 to 13 drinks weekly) also appeared to have a reduced dementia risk, but this result did not reach statistical significance. However, consuming 14 or more drinks a week appeared to be linked to an increased risk of dementia. The results were similar for both Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia, and they are in line with the findings of other recently published, large studies. But these studies are correlational, not randomized, and other factors may account for the effect.

Although no optimal level of alcohol consumption has been established, experts recommend that men consume no more than two drinks per day and women drink no more than one daily. (One drink equals 12 oz. of beer, about 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of 80-proof liquor.) All types of alcohol—beer, wine, and liquor—appear

#### NEW RESEARCH

##### Walking Reduces Risk of Cognitive Decline in Men and Women

Frequent walking may reduce the risk of cognitive decline in elderly men and women, according to two recent studies. Previous studies have found an association between exercise and a reduced risk of dementia, but it was unclear whether low-intensity exercise such as walking might be protective.

For the first study, researchers asked 2,257 men without dementia how far they walked each day. None of the participants had Parkinson's disease or stroke, which would impair their ability to walk. Four to eight years later, the rate of dementia was 80% higher in those who walked the least (less than a quarter-mile a day) than in those who walked the most (more than two miles a day).

For the second study, researchers assessed levels of physical activity, including walking, in 16,466 women. Nine to 15 years later, women who got the most physical activity had a 20% lower risk of cognitive impairment than those who got the least. In addition, women who walked for at least 1.5 hours a week had less cognitive decline over a two-year period than those who walked less than 40 minutes a week.

Walking may reduce the risk of dementia by promoting blood supply to the brain.

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