

Harnessing brain pathology in support of healthy lifestyle factors as strategies for dementia prevention

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Alzheimer's disease (AD) and Related Dementia (ADRD) are devastating diseases that affect over 55 million people worldwide and imposes an estimated economic burden of over \$800 billion annually¹. This figure is projected to increase as the global population ages, with the prevalence of AD/ADRD expected to triple over the next 30 years¹. To date, there is no cure to stop or reverse disease progression, underscoring the critical need for the development of primary or secondary prevention strategies that target modifiable risk factors to delay or prevent the onset of clinical symptoms.

Over the past decade, there has been ever-growing, yet controversial, evidence in the role of modifiable risk factors and risk reduction strategies for dementia. This is exemplified by the conflicting conclusions from two recent commissioned reports^{2,3}. The National Academy of Medicine (NAM) report² concluded in 2017 that the evidence from large randomized controlled trials (RCTs), the 'gold standard' for evaluating an intervention's effectiveness, is insufficient to support a public health campaign for dementia prevention. However, the report identified three intervention strategies with potential benefits: cognitive training, blood pressure management for people with hypertension, and physical activity. In contrast, the

2020 Lancet Commission report ³ advocated for a more ambitious and aggressive approach to prevention, based on evidence from both observational studies and RCTs, concluding that 40% of worldwide dementia cases could be prevented or delayed by modifying 12 risk factors: low education, hypertension, hearing impairment, smoking, obesity, depression, physical inactivity, diabetes, low social contact, excessive alcohol consumption, traumatic brain injury, and air pollution. While the discrepancies between these reports underscores the complexity of translating research evidence into both individual and policy recommendations, risk reduction interventions remain a promising, inexpensive and relatively safe strategy for lowering dementia risk.

In the current issue of JAMA Neurology, Dhana and colleagues⁴ contribute important evidence to this debate by reporting a robust association between a composite healthy “lifestyle” score and cognitive function proximate to death, independent of AD/ADRD pathology burden, ~~including β -amyloid load, phosphorylated tau tangle burden, and other dementia-related brain pathologies~~. The authors conclude that five lifestyle factors ~~(, including diet, physical activity, cognitive engagement, smoking, and alcohol consumption),~~ may operate through both prevention and resilience in that cognitive benefits were observed even for those who had neurodegenerative pathologies. [These interesting results add strengths to the concept that health and lifestyle factors are important strategies for prevention and suggest that several mechanisms may be at work.](#)

A unique feature of the study by Dhana et al. is the comprehensive examination of brain pathologies of aging, including AD pathology, vascular disease-

(~~arteriolosclerosis and cerebral atherosclerosis~~), Lewy Body disease, TDP-43, and hippocampal sclerosis, along with the longitudinal analysis of lifestyle score and cognition proximate to death among 586 decedents followed up to 24 years. A series of analyses showed that one point increase in the healthy lifestyle score (range 0 to 5, with higher score indicating a healthier lifestyle) was associated with 0.216 standardized units higher in cognitive performance ($\beta=0.216$; standard error (SE)=0.036; P-value<0.001), 0.120 units less β -amyloid load in the brain ($\beta = -0.120$; SE = 0.041; P-value = 0.003), and a higher healthy lifestyle score was associated with better cognition even after accounting for the combined burden of brain pathologies ($\beta=0.166$; SE=0.033; P-value<0.001).

While the observational nature of the study ~~limits the ability to infer~~makes it challenging to establish causality, it is an important step towards understanding the underlying mechanisms linking modifiable risk factors with AD/ADRD. Prior studies have found an association of increased brain amyloid load and tau aggregates with several modifiable risk factors⁵⁻⁸, such as sleep disturbances, vascular risk factors (e.g., hypertension and diabetes), depression, and physical inactivity supporting a role for primary prevention. Others supported a potential “resilience” framework, where compensatory factors (e.g., high educational attainment, high cognitive and physical activity) appear to be protective of cognitive function even among those carrying high genetic risk for AD/ADRD or in the presence of AD pathologies⁹. Dhana et al.⁴ demonstrated that only 11.6% of the effects of the lifestyle score on global cognition was through the pathway of β -amyloid load, while 88.4% was presumably a direct effect of lifestyle on cognition. Future studies are needed to clarify other

mechanisms that underlie the link between these risk factors and cognition ~~in late~~
life.

~~In this study, Dhana et al.⁴ computed averages of lifestyle scores from all available follow-up visits over a maximum of 2 decades. This approach helps reduce concerns about reporting bias and~~ One potential explanation is “reverse causality”, ~~in particularly which when~~ factors such as cognitive and physical activity are assessed in late life, close to clinical symptoms onset, might themselves be the consequence of prodromal changes in AD/ADRD that has been developing silently over the years. ~~Over the past few years, The need for~~ ~~There has been~~ ~~is~~ ~~increasing recognition~~ ~~about~~ a life course approach, which posits that risk factors operate over all life stages, to understand the causal nature and earliest effect of modifiable risk factors for dementia prevention ~~has gained increasing attention~~^{2,3}. Emerging evidence suggests that cardiovascular risk factors, sleep fragmentation, and depression in early adulthood are associated with midlife cognition or risk of dementia¹⁰⁻¹², while mixed results have been found for physical activity, with studies showing evidence of reverse causation¹³.

~~In this study, Dhana et al.⁴ computed averages of lifestyle scores from all available follow-up visits over a maximum of 2 decades to mitigate measurement error due to self-reporting. While this helps to address the issue of reporting bias, reverse-causation may still exist given that AD/ADRD pathology may take decades to develop and it is likely, although the information is not provided, that many did not have maximum follow-up time. **Notably, participants in this study had a mean**~~

age at death of almost 91 years. Given that very old adults tend to have mixed brain pathologies and that many very old decedents are found to have incidental neuropathology, this could also explain why the association between lifestyle score, cognition and neuropathology was limited. This is supported by their age-stratified analysis in which the independent association between lifestyle and cognition was stronger for individuals who died at the age of 91 and older.

The use of a composite lifestyle score may be an accessible way to summarize and quantify the overall impact of lifestyle factors. However, ~~it is not it makes it difficult to determine,~~ it fails to address potential colinear and ~~possible to investigate~~ interactive effects among different lifestyle factors ~~or, and to identify which which.~~ Another important remaining question is which modifiable risk factors may confer the greatest benefits and should thus be prioritized in dementia intervention trials. Given that Dhana et al.⁴ only included five risk factors, ~~most of the risk factors included in this study~~ which have not previously associated with AD or vascular pathology, ~~it is unsurprising that the relationship between the composite lifestyle score and cognition was mostly independent of dementia-related pathologies.~~ Future research ~~might should~~ include other important risk factors better known to be linked with dementia-related pathologies, such as hypertension, diabetes, sleep disturbances, and depression^{6,8}. Furthermore, since dementia is a complex condition that involves several risk factors and these in turn are often coexistent, there is growing recognition for a multidomain approach to dementia prevention, where both additive and synergistic effects between

individual domains are considered. One of the first and largest multidomain RCTs, the Finnish Geriatric Intervention Study to Prevent Cognitive Impairment and Disability (FINGER) trial, suggested that a 2-year intervention targeting diet, exercise, cognitive training, and management of CVD risk factors improved global cognition modestly in older adults at high risk for dementia¹⁴. The U.S. trial, Protect Brain Health Through Lifestyle Intervention to reduce Risk (U.S. POINTER), has been launched to determine the effects of a FINGER-like multidomain intervention among older American adults¹⁵. More recently, exciting results from the Systematic Multi-Domain Alzheimer's Risk Reduction Trial (SMARRT), demonstrated that a 2-year personalized, multidomain risk reduction RCT improved cognition and risk factor profile among high-risk American older adults¹⁶. Each participant in the SMARRT intervention worked with a behavioral coach to develop a personalized plan related to their modifiable risk factors (from eight risk factors). Given these promising results, as well as the increasing number of modifiable risk factors that have been identified, future RCTs should be conducted targeting multiple modifiable risk factors, possibly earlier in the life course.

It has been over a decade since ~~we introduced~~ the concept of population attributable risk to project the public health impact of dementia risk factor reduction ~~was introduced~~ and found that 30-40% of dementia cases worldwide can be attributable to seven potentially modifiable risk factors¹⁷. Over the past decade, studies have identified an increasing

number of novel risk factors for dementia and have begun to uncover the mechanisms through which these modifiable risk factors could impact cognitive aging and prompted multidomain interventions. Despite this ongoing progress, critical questions remain to be addressed regarding the mechanistic pathways linking modifiable risk factors and cognitive aging and the directionality of this link. [The study by Darhana et al.⁴ is one of the first to harness brain pathology to investigate these mechanisms and investigate these mechanisms is a crucial step forward in addressing these important questions. -](#)

There is an urgent need for more well-designed RCTs to pave the way for dementia risk reduction in the era of precision medicine. These strategies should be offered in conjunction with AD medications, similar to the approach in cardiovascular disease prevention and treatment in which medications along with lifestyle strategies are the standard of care.

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