

Visit the dentist, have an eye test, wear a nicotine patch – all keep dementia at bay

Our susceptibility to Alzheimer's, like heart disease and cancer, is influenced by factors within our control. And the disease's long lead time gives us years of opportunity in which to make a difference.

Especially remarkable is that the state of your health in middle age – your 40s and 50s – appears to foreshadow the health of your brain in your 70s and 80s.

Last week, we looked at some of the dietary changes and exercise methods that have been scientifically proven to help stave off dementia.

This week, we examine the small steps you can take to protect your general health that will help build a brain able to function successfully into your 90s, or an entire lifetime.

BRUSH AWAY DEMENTIA

Those with tooth and gum disease score lower on memory and cognition tests, according to an analysis by the University of West Virginia School of Dentistry.

Researcher Richard Crout theorises that an infection responsible for gum disease gives off inflammatory by-products that travel to areas of the brain involved in memory loss. These inflammatory agents may be toxic to brain cells.

Research at the University of Southern California comparing twins found that those with periodontal disease, characterised by loose and missing teeth, before they were 35 quadrupled the likelihood

By **Jean Carper**

of having dementia later in life. The probable culprit: a lifetime exposure to inflammation that not only weakens gum structure but also harms brain tissue.

Those with the most severe gingivitis – inflamed gums, an early sign of periodontal disease – are two to three times more likely to show signs of impaired memory and cognition than those with the least, according to neurologists at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Consequently, brushing, flossing and generally preventing gum disease may keep your gums and teeth healthy, and also your memory sharper.

THINK ABOUT A NICOTINE PATCH

You may be surprised to learn that nicotine can boost the functioning of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter typically diminished in the brains of people with Alzheimer's. Thus, it may improve learning, memory, and focus.

Researchers at the University of Vermont asked 74 non-smokers aged 55 and older, who had mild memory impairment, to wear a nicotine patch for a year.

Those who wore the patch improved on cognitive measures, including delayed-word-recall accuracy, speed of memory, and reaction time.

There were no downsides to the nicotine patch and on the upside, it lowered blood pressure.

HAVE YOUR EYES CHECKED

If you preserve good or excellent vision as you age, your chances of developing dementia drop by an astonishing 63 per cent. But seeing an ophthalmologist for an exam and possible treatment at least once in later life cuts your dementia odds by about the same amount.

On the other hand, if you have poor vision and don't see an ophthalmologist, your odds of getting Alzheimer's soar by 950 per cent according to a recent study at the University of Michigan Health System.

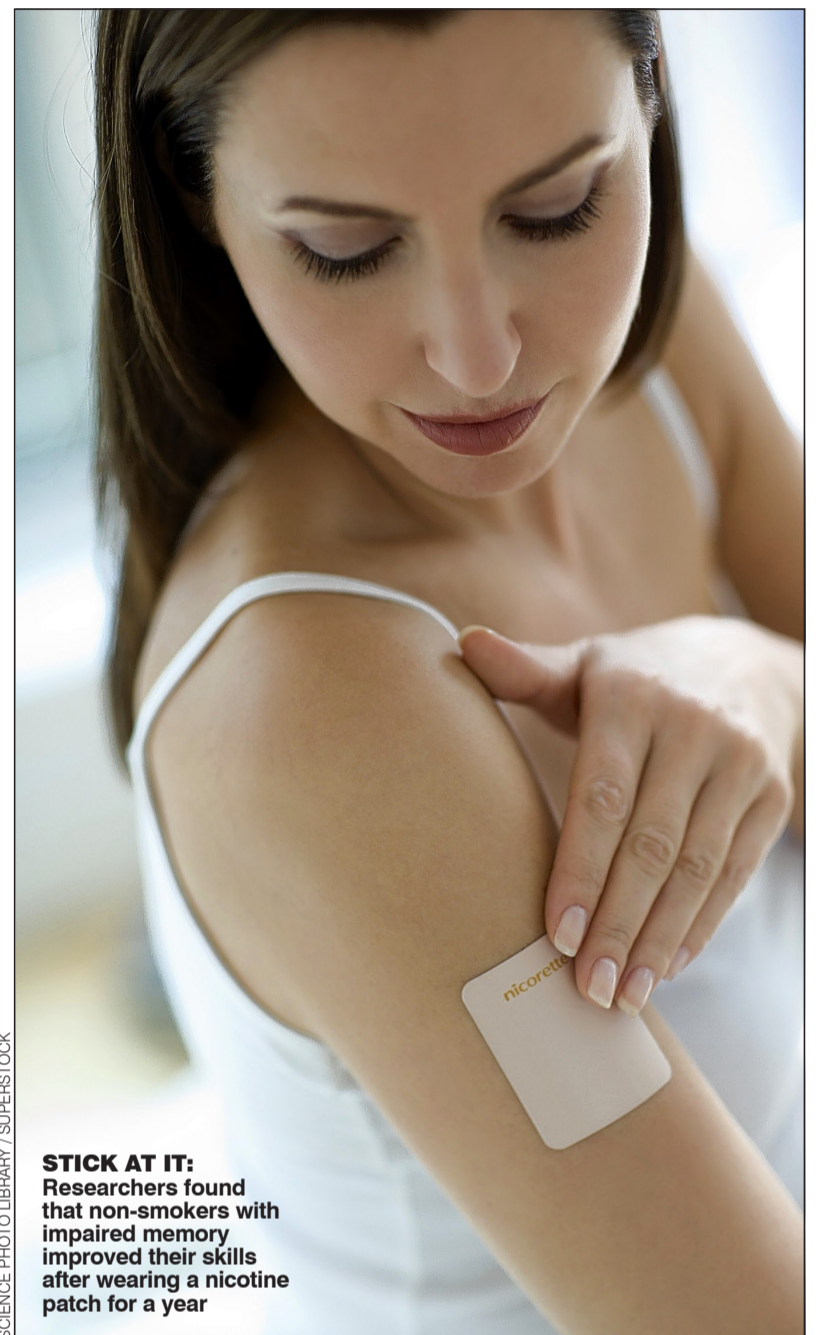
Surprisingly, the study suggests that untreated poor vision in late life is not just a symptom of dementia but also a strong predictor of it. Thus, treating vision problems may be an intervention strategy to delay the onset of cognitive decline and dementia.

Researchers believe that impaired vision makes it difficult to participate in mental and physical activities such as reading and exercising, as well as social activities, all believed to delay cognitive decline and Alzheimer's.

FIGHT THE SNORE WAR

About one million Britons have a sleep disorder in which they gasp for air, emitting loud bursts of snoring, sometimes hundreds of times a night. It happens when muscles in your throat and mouth relax, allowing your tongue to slide back, blocking your windpipe and cutting off oxygen. This is called obstructive sleep apnoea.

Most people consider it a mild inconvenience, but it can have seri-



STICK AT IT: Researchers found that non-smokers with impaired memory improved their skills after wearing a nicotine patch for a year

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ous consequences for your brain, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, have discovered. Using MRI brain scans, they detected a loss of brain tissue in sleep apnoea patients similar to that seen in Alzheimer's brains.

In fact, a specific area of the brain involved in memory was 20 per cent smaller than normal in sleep apnoea sufferers.

Researchers are not saying that sleep apnoea causes Alzheimer's, but rather that it appears to worsen cognitive decline.

If you believe you have sleep apnoea, have it medically diagnosed, preferably at a sleep clinic, and get treatment.

DON'T BE LONELY

Being lonely is different from being alone, says Robert S. Wilson, a Rush University psychologist and lead author of a study on loneliness and the risk of Alzheimer's.

'Loneliness is not just social isola-

tion – it is emotional isolation,' he says. 'It is feeling alone, not just being alone.'

Wilson and colleagues quizzed 800 elderly people and loneliness emerged as a prime predictor of Alzheimer's. People with the highest loneliness scores were twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's as those with the lowest. Why is unclear. Wilson speculates it may compromise neural systems. In animals subjected to social isolation, brain cells shrink in critical memory centres.

He suggests therapy and possibly antidepressants (loneliness is tied to depression) to help stop cognitive damage before it becomes severe.

● *100 Simple Things You Can Do To Prevent Alzheimer's*, by Jean Carper, is published by Ebury on March 3, priced £10.99. To order your copy at the special price of £9.99 with free p&p, call The Review Bookstore on 0845 155 0713 or visit www.MailLife.co.uk/books.



SEA SOURCE: Oysters contain zinc

Why taking zinc is not to be sneezed at ...

For many years, zinc supplements have been thought to help shorten the duration of the common cold – and now there is scientific evidence to back this up, writes *Jill Foster*.

Earlier this month The Cochrane Library, an international network of health researchers, revealed that people who took zinc syrup, lozenges or tablets within 24 hours of catching a cold shook off the symptoms much faster than those who took a placebo. The severity of the cold was also reduced.

Several studies by researchers at

Duke University in North Carolina have found that zinc can help wound healing and protect skin against UV radiation. And there is much evidence that zinc can help boost low sperm counts.

'Zinc is essential for optimal growth and repair of body cells and energy production,' says dietician Katie Peck. 'It's essential for our immune system as well as preventing colds and flu.'

'One of the richest sources is lean red meat – 100g grilled sirloin steak provides about 5mg of zinc,

while organ meats such as liver and kidney, as well as cheese, egg yolk and seafood such as oysters, are also rich sources.'

'Vegetarians can get their intake from wholewheat breads (that contain the germ and bran), as well as beans, chickpeas and lentils. Nuts, seeds and fortified breakfast cereals are good sources too. But it's best to get your intake from animal products if possible.'

If we suspect we're not getting enough zinc in our diet, should we take a supplement? 'The UK

recommended zinc intake is 9.5mg a day for men, equivalent to one oyster or 16 brazil nuts, and 7mg a day for women, equivalent to a pork chop,' says dietician Priya Tew.

'If you're taking an individual supplement of zinc, it's possible to overdose. Symptoms of zinc toxicity include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.'

'However, if you take a multivitamin and mineral that contains zinc, this should be fine as it will contain a safe level.'