

# Healthy living can beat dementia genes

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Most people even with a high genetic risk are not going to develop dementia, an expert said GETTY IMAGES

A family history of dementia might not be as bleak as previously thought after a study found that even those genetically prone to the condition may be able to reduce their risk by a third with a healthy lifestyle.

A study of 196,000 people showed that the risk of dementia in those with a healthy lifestyle was lower than in those with unhealthy lifestyles and this reduction could be achieved irrespective of genetic risk.

Elzbieta Kuzma, of the University of Exeter Medical School, who jointly led the study, said: “Although we can’t change our genes, we can lead a healthy lifestyle to try to reduce our risk of dementia.”

The study looked at people aged over 60 for a period of eight years and is the first of its kind to look at both lifestyle and genetic factors.

People were grouped into three categories, for both genetic and lifestyle risk.

The 20 per cent whose genes least disposed them to dementia were classed as “low risk”, the 60 per cent in the middle were “intermediate” and those most genetically prone to the condition were “high”.

Separately, by looking at smoking, physical activity, diet and alcohol consumption, people were split into the same three categories for lifestyle, with 8 per cent deemed at highest risk.

The scientists found that those with unlucky genetics who lived unhealthy lives were almost three times more likely to develop dementia than those with a low risk and a healthy lifestyle. However, it appeared that they could close the gap significantly with sensible living.

The study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that 1.8 per cent of people classed as being at high risk developed dementia if they also smoked, drank and ate unhealthily, compared with 1.1 per cent of those who looked after themselves. In those with the lowest risk and a healthy lifestyle, 0.6 per cent developed dementia over the course of the study.

In the UK, there are more than 850,000 people with dementia, which is expected to rise above 1 million by 2025. One in 14 people aged over 65 has dementia, rising to one in six over the age of 80.

There is now a significant body of research showing that lifestyle choices affect the risk of developing conditions such as Alzheimer's. In May, the World Health Organisation released a statement recommending a healthy lifestyle to reduce dementia risk.

David Llewellyn, of the University of Exeter Medical School, who jointly led the study, said everyone should take heart from it. "Most people even with a high genetic risk are not going to develop dementia. But those lifestyle factors could make a really important difference to those individuals."