

What friends are for: socialising at 60 can stave off dementia at 70

Tom Whipple, Science Editor

August 3 2019, 12:01am, The Times



Friendships and social activity could keep your brain sharper in later life ALAMY

If you spend time with friends when you are 60 you are less likely to have dementia when you are 70.

Scientists have found that socialising may be a way to keep your brain sharp in old age in one of the largest and longest studies of its kind.

There is growing evidence that friendships and social activity can delay the onset of dementia. Many previous studies have shown this, although they have suffered because it has been hard to tell definitively which caused the other. An alternative explanation is that people who socialise less are doing so because they already have early signs of dementia.

The latest work, published in the journal *Plos Medicine*, used the Whitehall II study, which followed more than 10,000 civil servants from about the age of 35 as they progressed into old age.

It found that people who had more friendships in middle age were sharper at 55 and that those who socialised more at 60 appeared less likely to develop dementia.

Because the team followed people from a younger age, Andrew Sommerlad, of University College London, said they were confident that the socialising really was keeping brains sharper.

“What we think is most likely is that being more socially active exercises different aspects of your cognitive function, like language and memory, and so builds better resilience against the damage that accumulates as a result of dementia,” Dr Sommerlad said. “They have better strategies to be able to cope with damage in the brain.”

At present about 7 per cent of people over 65 have dementia. If socialising has a protective effect, the results imply that by improving social contact that figure could drop to 6 per cent.

Dr Sommerlad said the work added to evidence that loneliness in middle and old age should be taken seriously. “We know that in the UK social isolation and loneliness is a real problem for older people. These sort of results help to encourage government to help people to stay connected with their neighbourhoods and friends,” he said.

Sara Imarisio, head of research at Alzheimer’s Research UK, said that while the causes of dementia were complex, and many cases were unavoidable, a lot of research showed that changes to the way we live could help.

“Evidence suggests one in three cases of dementia could be down to risk factors potentially in our power to change,” she said. “There is strong evidence that what’s good for your heart is good for your brain, but the social connections you maintain in later life may also play a role in shaping brain health.

“With an ageing population in the UK and many people facing later life alone, initiatives to encourage people to stay connected to their families, friends and communities will bring important health benefits. In today’s busy world, we can all take a moment to be a friendly face, stop for a chat and make a difference to the lives of those around us.”