

# Looking forward to old age can save you from Alzheimer's

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Developing a positive image of old people could help reduce the risk of Alzheimer's CORBIS

People who think that the elderly are irritable, forgetful or slow to learn are more likely to acquire the physical signs of Alzheimer's disease, according to brain scans.

Scientists think it might be possible to reduce the risk of developing the disease by giving them a more positive image of old age. This could be achieved by showing them words associated with the advantages of growing old, such as "wisdom" or "creativity".

There are thought to be more than 850,000 people with dementia in Britain, of whom just under two thirds have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The total is expected to rise to a million by 2025 and two million by the middle of the

century. Dementia is already the leading cause of death for women in England and Wales.

A team of public health researchers and neuroscientists led by Yale University said that the stress that stems from holding pessimistic views of ageing could make people vulnerable to the brain changes linked to the disease.

More than three decades ago the group asked 52 people in an ageing study in Baltimore whether they agreed with 16 negative statements about the elderly, such as “Old people are absent-minded” or “Old people are grouchy”.

Each then had up to ten MRI scans a year to monitor how their brains evolved as they grew older. It turned out that those who agreed with more of the gloomy sentences about old people tended to lose more volume from their hippocampus, a part of the brain that plays a vital role in the formation and retention of memories. This shrinkage has been linked to Alzheimer’s.

The scientists also examined the brains of 74 people who had died since completing the questionnaire, and found that those with more negative ideas of old age were much more likely to have the amyloid plaques that are a key harbinger of the disease.

Laura Phipps, of Alzheimer’s Research UK, said that it was difficult to disentangle the psychological and medical factors that might contribute to the condition. “We know that some of the early changes associated with Alzheimer’s can happen ten to 15 years before symptoms show . . . it’s hard to know whether these early changes had a knock-on effect on people’s social behaviours and attitudes, or vice versa,” she said.

The findings were published yesterday in the journal *Psychology and Ageing*. A separate study published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* also indicated that androgen deprivation therapy, a common hormone treatment for prostate cancer, might double men’s risk of Alzheimer’s.