In 2014, it was estimated that 5 million adults over the age of 65 have dementia. That number is predicted to rise to nearly 14 million by 2060. The rate is increasing, and a new study finds that our dietary decisions may be to blame. The study, published in the journal Neurology, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology, showed that a diet low in fruits, vegetables, beans and tea was liked to three times greater risk of dementia.

The observational study was conducted in 1,059 Greek individuals with an average age of 73 and over a three-year period. Participants conducted questionnaires and were assessed a score associated with inflammatory factors associated with their food choices. Researchers found that the higher the score, the higher the risk for dementia. The study was observational, meaning that the takeaway of the data can only show that there is an association (but not definitive proof) that anti-inflammatory diets may play a role in the prevention of dementia.

**What is dementia?**

Dementia is a term used to describe a variety of brain-related indicators associated with worsening memory, decision making, and reasoning, however the symptoms of dementia can vary by individual. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia.

**What factors are associated with an increased risk of dementia?**

Advanced age, genetics and ethnicity can all play a role in the risk of dementia. They are not modifiable, meaning, they cannot be changed. The good news, however is this: another major factor associated with dementia is one you can control. Your diet.

**5 ways to protect your brain from dementia**

Numerous studies have shown that lifestyle choices play a large role in brain health. How you approach your diet is the first step.

1. **Follow a MIND diet approach**

   Perhaps the most studied diet related to brain health is the MIND (Mediterranean — DASH intervention for neurodegenerative delay) diet. The diet consists of ten healthy
foods and five foods to limit. Adherence to the MIND diet has been shown in multiple studies to reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s by as much as 53% when followed rigorously. Even moderate adherence led to 35% reduced risk.

2. **Focus on more color in the diet**

Color is a major factor in both the MIND and Mediterranean dietary protocols. That’s because color, coming from green leafy and cruciferous vegetables, berries, beans, teas, peppers, spices and even coffee indicates a high degree of nutrient density. A 2021 study showed that colorful plants, which are rich in flavonoids, helped to reduce cognitive decline in participants who consumed just ½ a serving a day of these brain protective foods. The more flavonoids consumed, the lower the risk.

3. **Get your protein in**

A 2021 animal study demonstrated that lower protein diets could have a detrimental impact on brain health. Specifically, researchers found that amino acids (derived from protein in the diet) may inhibit the formation of Alzheimer’s disease by inhibiting brain cell death, and reducing inflammation. You can get high quality protein from plants (such as beans and legumes) as well as animals (such as chicken breast, fatty fish, and eggs). If supplemental protein is necessary, a high-quality protein powder can assist as well. Exact protein needs vary by age and activity level.

4. **Eliminate added sugars from the diet**

While adding nutrient dense foods are essential to protect overall brain health, taking away more problematic ingredients is also critical. Studies show that added sugar — often found in sugar sweetened drinks and cereals, candy and pastries — can increase the risk for multiple chronic conditions such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Both conditions are linked with worsening brain health.

5. **Replace processed foods with real food**

Processed foods (often referred to as highly palatable foods) not only skew your brain’s ability to assess hunger — which means you can easily eat large quantities — they replace more nutrient dense foods in the diet. An animal study from Ohio State University found that just four weeks of consuming processed foods led to memory loss and increased inflammation in rats. However, when the rats were provided omega-3 supplementation, their symptoms reduced.

Author Michael Pollan defined food as “something that comes from nature, was fed from nature, and eventually rots.” Eating more food and fewer manufactured calories may be a great step towards strengthening brain health. Instead of a frozen dinner with multiple ingredients, for example, choose grilled salmon with a side of broccoli, or wilted spinach with lentils and brown rice. For snacks, eliminate the potato chips and replace them with mixed nuts, roasted chickpeas or celery with almond butter.
Protecting our brains as we age is doable. Get more nutritional bang for your buck by choosing foods that are nutrient dense — and give your brain the TLC it deserves.