

OVER A THIRD OF DEMENTIA CASES COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED

THE LANCET

MED EXPO— At least 35 percent of dementia cases can be traced to lifestyle factors people have control over, a new report found.

The Lancet Commission on Dementia Prevention, Intervention and Care's report released recently outlined nine modifiable risk factors contributing to dementia throughout a person's lifespan.

The factors range from adequate education at a young age, hypertension in mid-life and physical inactivity in later life. If those and other factors were addressed, the report concludes there's potential for significant reductions in dementia cases worldwide.

"Effective dementia prevention, intervention, and care could transform the future for society and vastly improve living and dying for individuals with dementia and their families," the author's wrote. "Acting now on what we already know can make this difference happen."

This call for preventive measures echoes messages put forth by doctors in recent years. There's been a greater focus on preventive health over the last decade, said Mankato Clinic Chief Medical Officer Dr. Julie Gerndt, who welcomed the report's findings.

"It really starts early," she said of prevention, adding "(the study) really points to the importance of taking care of yourself in mid-life as well when it comes to blood pressure and weight."

Researchers estimated there could be a 2 percent reduction in new dementia cases if the risk of hypertension were eliminated. For obesity, there could be a 1 percent reduction. Both are included as mid-life risk factors, but pale in comparison to hearing loss. At an estimated 9 percent reduction in new cases, hearing loss was considered one of the largest risk factors in the study.

The connections between factors like smoking — 5 percent — and depression — 4 percent — to dementia are understood, but hearing loss is considered a newly recognized potential risk factor. Gerndt said the inclusion of hearing loss in the study was interesting, as it can be readily addressed by wearing ear protection.

"Especially kids who are listening to very loud earphones," she said, adding workers in loud environments should also protect their ears.

Well before mid-life, the authors estimated 8 percent of dementia cases may be associated with inadequate early school education. Next to hearing loss, education was the second biggest modifiable risk factor for dementia in the study.

"Low educational level is thought to result in vulnerability to cognitive decline because it results in less cognitive reserve," the authors wrote. They mainly referred to childhood education, so whether additional education beyond secondary schools is additionally helpful is unclear.

For late life, risk factors included depression, diabetes, physical inactivity, smoking and low social contact. The Mankato and North Mankato ACT on Alzheimer's Action Team recently

announced a new program to address the last issue. A chorus for people with Alzheimer's is designed to draw people with the diagnosis back into the community.

"That's really what the choir is about, those social experiences," said Sandi Lubrant, team lead of the local ACT on Alzheimer's group.

The flip side of the report is the number of dementia cases that can't be addressed through lifestyle modifications. About 65 percent of cases fall into this category, which includes genetic risk factors.

"We still can't walk away with the idea that we know really well how to prevent it," Gerndt said.

But the report at least highlights measures people can take to reduce the risks. While substantial coordination between doctors, communities and various levels of government would be needed to address the risk factors on a large scale, individuals don't have to wait to limit the risk factors they can control.

