

Dementia Reducing your risk



Alzheimer's
Society

It will take a society to beat dementia



We are reviewing this publication. If you would like to give us any feedback, you can email us at **publications@alzheimers.org.uk** or call us on **020 7423 7455**.

About this booklet

This booklet tells you about dementia and the changes you can make to lower your chances of getting dementia.

Anything that can increase a person's chances of developing dementia is known as a 'risk factor'. Some risk factors can't be changed but there are lots that can.

Unfortunately, there's no way to guarantee that you won't get dementia. By making the changes suggested on pages 15–37 of this booklet, however, you may be able to make it less likely. Some of these changes may be easier to make than others. But you will lower your risk of getting dementia by following as many suggestions as you can.

This booklet is mostly for people in their 40s, 50s or 60s who want to reduce their risk of getting dementia. However, the suggestions can be useful for people of any age.



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What is dementia?

The word 'dementia' describes a group of symptoms that include memory problems and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language. It may also involve changes in mood, perception or behaviour.

These changes are usually small to start with, but for someone with dementia they become bad enough to affect daily life.

Dementia isn't a natural part of ageing. It occurs when the brain is affected by a disease. It is also a progressive condition. This means its symptoms get worse over time, and the condition will eventually shorten a person's life.



Dementia isn't a natural part of ageing. It occurs when the brain is affected by a disease.



Call our Dementia Support Line on **0333 150 3456**

Types of dementia

There are many different types of dementia. Most people with a diagnosis will have one of the four main types. Dementia affects everyone differently. However, each main type has some common symptoms.

- 1 ● **Alzheimer's disease** develops when abnormal structures called 'plaques' and 'tangles' form in the brain and eventually cause brain cells to die. It is the most common type of dementia and tends to cause problems with memory and thinking at first.
- **Vascular dementia** is caused by the brain not receiving enough blood to work properly. Symptoms vary depending on where in the brain is worst affected, but they usually include problems with thinking, memory and mood at first.
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB)** occurs when tiny clumps of protein called Lewy bodies develop inside brain cells and cause them to die. DLB has many symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease, but it can also cause hallucinations and delusions during the early stages, as well as varying levels of alertness and sleep problems. Many people with DLB also have problems with movement, similar to those in Parkinson's disease.



- **Frontotemporal dementia (FTD)** is caused by damage to areas of the brain called the frontal and temporal lobes. As well as problems with thinking, FTD can also cause changes in behaviour and personality, and it sometimes specifically affects language and communication.

Some people have more than one type of dementia. This is called 'mixed dementia'. The most common type is a combination of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Most of the information in this booklet is about reducing your risk of getting Alzheimer's disease or vascular dementia. This is because these are more common types of dementia so there is much more research about them compared to less common types, such as DLB or FTD.



For more information about all aspects of dementia, including symptoms, go to [alzheimers.org.uk](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk)



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Understanding your risk

There are many risk factors for dementia. The risk of developing the condition depends on a mixture of these factors and varies from person to person.

You cannot change some risk factors for dementia, such as age. There are other factors that can be changed but are difficult for a person to change by themselves, such as air pollution.

However, there are still lots of risk factors that can be changed through individual lifestyle choices. This is more likely to happen with support from family, friends and healthcare professionals.



As a general rule, what's good for the heart is good for the brain.



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Risk factors you can change

There are many risk factors for dementia that you can change, with the right support. These changes mainly involve keeping your body healthy and preventing damage to your brain.

Looking after your heart and blood circulation is particularly important in reducing your risk of dementia. This is because a healthy heart and good blood circulation help to:

- keep your brain cells well supplied with oxygen and nutrients
- prevent you developing health conditions that make it harder to pump blood around the body, including to the brain.

Without this, your brain is much more likely to be affected by the diseases that cause dementia. This is why many risk factors for dementia are unhealthy behaviours or lifestyle choices that affect heart and blood circulation, such as:

- smoking
- drinking too much alcohol
- eating unhealthily
- being physically inactive.

Other important risk factors for dementia that most people can try to change or avoid include:

- mental and social inactivity (see page 28)
- age-related hearing loss (see page 35)
- traumatic brain injuries (see page 37).



When to start reducing your risk

The brain diseases that cause dementia often start many years or even decades before a person has noticeable problems with their memory or thinking. This means that the best way to reduce your risk of dementia is to start as early as possible. Making positive changes during your 40s, 50s or 60s could reduce your risk of getting dementia in your 60s, 70s and 80s.

As you get older, you may find you're more able to look after your health. You may have children who have grown up and moved out of the home, giving you more time to focus on your health. Or you might find that getting older is affecting the things you want and are able to do – many people find this motivates them to start taking better care of their health.

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Risk factors you can't change

Some risk factors for dementia can't be changed. The most important are a person's age, genes, sex and ethnic origin.

Age

Over the age of 65, a person's risk of developing Alzheimer's disease or vascular dementia doubles roughly every five years. However, around 1 in 20 people living with dementia develop it before the age of 65. This is known as 'young-onset dementia'.

Genes

There are certain genes that may be passed down (inherited) from a parent that can increase a person's chances of getting dementia. Only a few of these genes definitely cause dementia if they are passed down, and they are very uncommon.



For more information, see factsheet 405 **Genetics of dementia.**



Gender and sex

Overall, there are more women than men who are living with dementia. This is mostly because women tend to live longer than men. The risk of getting dementia is about the same for men and women. However, women who are currently over 80 have a slightly higher risk of getting dementia than men their age.

Ethnic origin

A few studies have suggested that people from Black African, Black Caribbean and South Asian ethnic groups are more likely to get dementia than people from White ethnic groups.

Possible reasons for this include differences in the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease (CVD) between these groups – both diabetes and CVD are important risk factors for dementia. Health and social inequalities between these groups may also cause different levels of risk.



For more information about all the different risk factors for dementia, see factsheet [450 Risk factors for dementia](#).





Six ways to reduce your risk

There is good evidence that the following six things will help you reduce your risk of developing dementia:



Be physically active



Eat healthily



Don't smoke



Drink less alcohol



Stay mentally
and socially active



Take control
of your health

These are not listed in order of importance. The benefits of these changes will vary from person to person.

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Be physically active

Doing regular physical activity is one of the best ways to reduce your risk of dementia. It's good for your heart, circulation, weight and mental wellbeing.

You might find it difficult to start being more physically active, or worry it means doing an activity you don't enjoy. It's important to find activities that work for you. You might find it helpful to start off with a small amount of activity and then build up gradually.

There are two main types of physical activity – **aerobic activity** and **strength-building activity**.

Each type will keep you fit in different ways. Doing a combination of these activities will help you to reduce your risk of dementia. See pages 18–19 for examples of each activity type.

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Aerobic activity

Aerobic activity helps to keep your heart, lungs and blood circulation healthy – and this is good for brain health too.

Moderate intensity aerobic activity is anything that makes you breathe faster and feel warmer.

Vigorous aerobic activity is anything that makes you sweat or get out of breath after a while, making it difficult to talk without pausing for breath.

In general, one minute of vigorous activity is equal to two minutes of moderate intensity activity. The official UK recommendation is to try to do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity each week or 75 minutes of vigorous activity. You can break the activity up into smaller sessions if it's easier for you.

It's also a good idea to spend less time sitting or lying down and more time moving.

Strength-building activity

Strength-building activity works your major muscles (legs, back, stomach, shoulders, arms). This helps you to do everyday tasks. This type of activity also helps you to control the level of sugars in your blood and reduce your risk of diabetes, which is a risk factor for dementia.

Ideally, you should do strength-building activities on at least two or more days each week.

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Moderate aerobic activities

- brisk walking
- gentle swimming
- water aerobics
- hiking
- dancing
- cycling gently on flat ground
- tennis (doubles)
- pushing a lawnmower
- painting and decorating



Vigorous aerobic activities

- jogging or running fast
- cycling fast or uphill
- swimming fast
- tennis (singles)
- aerobics or spinning sessions

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Strength-building activities

- heavy gardening, such as digging and shovelling
- lifting weights or similar objects in the home, like cans or heavy books
- working with resistance bands
- exercises that use your body weight, such as push-ups and sit-ups
- dancing
- yoga, tai chi or Pilates
- wheeling a wheelchair



Activities that are both aerobic and strength-building

- football
- circuit training
- running
- netball or basketball
- hockey
- martial arts
- walking up stairs or a hill
- heavy gardening





Tips for keeping active

- ✓ Choose an activity you'll enjoy – this makes it more likely that you'll keep doing it.
- ✓ Try using a wearable gadget (such as a wristband fitness tracker) or a smartphone app (such as the 'Active 10' and 'Couch to 5K' apps) to track your progress. Set yourself a target and try to stick to it. A good target for many people is to aim to walk 10,000 steps per day.
- ✓ You might find a workout video helpful, such as the videos on the NHS website (see 'Other useful organisations' on pages 40–44).
- ✓ Group activities like hiking clubs are a great way to connect and interact with people. This helps to keep the brain active and engaged.
- ✓ If you enjoy activities like tai chi, Pilates and yoga, keep doing them. They're also good for balance and staying flexible, and may prevent you from falling. There is some evidence that tai chi may reduce your risk of getting dementia, but more research is needed to prove this.



Eat healthily

Eating a healthy, balanced diet may reduce your risk of dementia, as well as other conditions including cancer, type 2 diabetes, obesity, stroke and heart disease.

No single ingredient, nutrient or food can improve brain health by itself. Instead, eating a range of different foods in the right proportions is what makes a difference. This is known as a 'balanced' diet.

By eating a balanced diet you are more likely to get all the nutrients you need for your brain to stay healthy. The NHS Eatwell Guide shows what food groups make up a balanced diet and roughly how much of each is needed to stay healthy.



For more information, visit www.nhs.uk/eatwellguide

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Try to follow these guidelines:

- **Include wholegrain starchy foods in most meals** – for example, wholemeal bread, rice and pasta.
- **Eat more fruits, vegetables, pulses (for example, beans, peas and lentils), and nuts and seeds.**
- **Eat less red meat** – for example, beef and lamb, and especially processed meats such as sausages and bacon.
- **If you eat fish, do so regularly** – particularly oily types like salmon and mackerel. However, try to limit eating battered or breaded fish, which are high in unhealthy fat.
- **Try to choose lower-fat dairy foods** where possible.
- **Use vegetable and plant oils for cooking and dressing** – for example, olive oil and rapeseed oil. Try to avoid solid fats like butter, lard or ghee.
- **Limit the amount of salt in your diet** – try not to eat more than 6g (about a teaspoon) a day.
- **Try to make sugary foods only occasional treats** – such as pastries, sweets, biscuits, cakes and chocolate.
- **Consume alcohol in moderation (ideally with food).** If you don't drink alcohol already, try not to start.



Don't smoke

If you smoke, you're putting yourself at a much higher risk of developing dementia later in life.

Smoking does a lot of harm to the circulation of blood around the body, particularly the blood vessels in the brain, as well as the heart and lungs.

It's never too late to quit smoking. However, the earlier you stop, the more brain damage you will avoid.



Tips for stopping smoking

- ✓ Talk to your GP or pharmacist about different ways to stop smoking.
- ✓ Try using a date or event as motivation for stopping. For example, you could make it a New Year's resolution.
- ✓ Consider using a less harmful nicotine product such as e-cigarettes (vaping), lozenges, patches, mouth and nasal sprays, or gum.
- ✓ Try using the NHS Quit smoking service, which includes a helpline, app and local support services (see 'Other useful organisations' on pages 40–44).



Drink less alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol increases your risk of developing dementia.

If you regularly drink alcohol, try to do so in moderation and within recommended limits. Drinking too much alcohol at one time exposes your brain to high levels of harmful chemicals.

Try to drink no more than 14 units of alcohol each week. This is equal to about one pint of beer or a small glass of wine each day. If you regularly drink much more than this, you are increasing your risk of damage to your brain and other organs, and so increasing your risk of dementia.

If you drink as many as 14 units of alcohol a week, try to spread them out over at least three days. You can see how many units there are in common alcoholic drinks on page 27.

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Tips for cutting down on alcohol

- ✓ Set yourself a weekly alcohol limit and keep track of how much you're drinking.
- ✓ Have several alcohol-free days each week.
- ✓ Try low-alcohol or alcohol-free drinks, or smaller sizes of drinks.
- ✓ Try to alternate between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks like cola, water or juice.
- ✓ Let your friends and family know that you're cutting down, and how they can support you. This can make it easier to drink less, especially at social events.
- ✓ Take advantage of particular dates and events to motivate you. For example, you could make a New Year's resolution to drink less.

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How many units are in your drink?

The units on this page are based on typical alcohol by volume (ABV) content. However, this does vary. If you're buying a bottle or can, it's helpful to check the ABV content on the label.



**Small glass of wine
(125ml, ABV 12%)**

1.5 units



**Large glass of wine
(250ml, ABV 12%)**

3 units



**Can or pint of beer,
lager or cider
(440ml, ABV 4%)**

1.5 units



**Pint of higher-strength
beer, lager or cider
(ABV 5.2%)**

3 units



**Shot of spirits like
gin, vodka, rum
(25ml, ABV 40%)**

1 unit

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Stay mentally and socially active

Engaging in mental or social activities may help to build up your brain's ability to cope with disease, relieve stress and improve your mood. This means doing these activities may help to delay, or even prevent, dementia from developing.

Find activities you enjoy that challenge your brain, and do them regularly. These could be puzzles or crosswords, but there are also many other activities you could do. Anything that engages your mind, involves processing information and develops your thinking skills is good for the brain and reducing your risk.



For example:

- any kind of adult education or learning
- arts and crafts (especially in groups)
- playing a musical instrument or singing
- volunteering
- doing 'brainteasers', such as puzzles, crosswords or quizzes
- playing card games, chess or board games
- reading books, or becoming a member of a book club
- creative writing or keeping a diary
- learning a new language.

If you use a smartphone or tablet (for example, an iPad), you might enjoy apps that can provide mental stimulation. These include puzzle, memory or board game apps.



For more information about volunteering for Alzheimer's Society, go to [alzheimers.org.uk/volunteer](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/volunteer)



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Social activities are also good for the brain, making them a great way to reduce your risk of getting dementia. This includes interacting with other people online as well as in person. This means it's important to try to keep in touch with the people who matter to you, such as friends and family.

Having a conversation with someone can also exercise a wide range of your mental skills, for example:

- actively listening to and communicating with the other person
- considering the meaning of what someone is trying to tell you and how they feel
- finding the right way to express what you want to say and putting words together in the right order for someone to understand
- recalling things that have happened which are relevant to what you're talking about.



One way to think about it is
'Use it or lose it'.

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Take control of your health

As you get older, you are more likely to develop certain health conditions, such as high blood pressure or diabetes. These conditions can increase the risk of getting dementia.

An important way to avoid this is by going for your free NHS Health Check. Your GP may invite you to one, or you can book an appointment by contacting them.

3 The NHS Health Check is available to anyone aged 40–74 who lives in England and does not already have diabetes or heart, kidney or circulation problems. It is designed to find any early signs of these conditions and stop them getting worse. Ideally, you should have this check-up every five years.

After your health check-up, you can discuss any concerns with a healthcare professional and get advice on looking after your health, including reducing your risk of dementia.

If you already have any of these conditions, it's still important to have regular health check-ups. However, you don't need to book an NHS Health Check specifically.



If you live in Northern Ireland, you can book a free Well Check through the Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke (NICHHS) charity (see ‘Other useful organisations’ on pages 40–44). If you live in Wales, you can use the Add to Your Life free online health and wellbeing check at **addtoyourlife.nhs.wales**

Get support for depression

It is likely that depression is a risk factor for dementia. If you feel you might be getting depressed, seek help early. If you often feel low, anxious or irritable, talk to your GP or contact a mental health organisation such as Mind (see ‘Other useful organisations’ on pages 40–44).



Get a good night's sleep

Sleeping well is important for your mental wellbeing and may reduce your risk of dementia. A good night's sleep for many people is around seven to eight hours.

Obstructive sleep apnoea is a sleep disorder that may particularly increase a person's risk of getting dementia. This is because it reduces the amount of oxygen that gets to the brain. People who have sleep apnoea stop breathing during their sleep and then wake up suddenly. If you have any problems sleeping well, particularly sleep apnoea, speak to your GP about getting support.



Protect your hearing and get it tested

Hearing loss may increase your risk of getting dementia. However, the reasons for this are still unclear.

Many people start to lose their hearing as they get older, though they may not notice it at first. To avoid hearing loss increasing your risk of getting dementia, it's important to get your hearing tested. You may be able to book a free hearing test at your local optician or speak to your GP about being referred to an audiologist (a doctor for hearing). This will identify any hearing issues you may have and provide ways of managing them, such as using a hearing aid.

Often, managing hearing loss works best when you start doing it early on. This means protecting your hearing from a young age. For example, you can avoid listening to loud noises for long periods, and wear ear protection when necessary.



Mid-life (aged 40–65) is an important time to start taking care of your health, if you're not doing so already.



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Protect your head

Traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) are caused by a blow or jolt to the head – especially when the person is knocked unconscious. TBIs can start a process in the brain where the substances that cause Alzheimer’s disease build up around the injured area.

Serious TBIs in younger people are mostly caused by:

- road traffic accidents
- an object accidentally hitting their head
- active service in the armed forces
- some sports (particularly boxing, cycling, skiing and horse riding).

Try to wear protective headgear in situations where there is a higher-than-normal risk of head injury – for example, riding a bike, working on a building site, horse riding or playing cricket.

More research is needed to fully understand the amount of long-term dementia risk involved in contact sports like rugby or football. However, it’s still important that coaching staff know how to deal with concussions and other head injuries.

They should also have a plan in place to make sure players get medical attention when they need it. In England, The Football Association (FA) and Rugby Football Union (RFU) have information about managing concussion on their websites (see ‘Other useful organisations’ on pages 40–44).

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Risk factors in the media

You may read stories in the media claiming that other things can reduce the risk of dementia, or even prevent it. It's important to be cautious – don't believe the claims you read straightaway.

The information and advice in this booklet are based on lots of evidence. Claims in the media may not be supported by evidence in the same way.

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If you'd like to know more about the evidence behind other claims of risk factors, go to **[alzheimers.org.uk/riskfactors](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/riskfactors)** or the NHS website (see 'Other useful organisations' on pages 40–44).



Next steps

As you'll have read in this booklet, there are some risk factors like age and genes that you can't change. However, for the ones you can, it's important to take control of your health and lifestyle.

By making some of these changes, you'll reduce your chances of developing dementia and a number of other conditions.



If you'd like to know more about dementia, go to [alzheimers.org.uk](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk)



Other useful organisations

Blood Pressure UK

help@bloodpressureuk.org

www.bloodpressureuk.org

Blood Pressure UK is a charity dedicated to lowering people's blood pressure. It provides information and support for individuals and healthcare professionals, and runs awareness-raising activities.

British Heart Foundation

0808 802 1234 (Heart Helpline, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk

www.bhf.org.uk

The British Heart Foundation is a national heart charity that invests in research, supports people with heart and circulatory illness, and provides information to help people reduce their risk of cardiovascular illness.

Diabetes UK

0345 123 2399 (helpline, 9am–6pm Monday–Friday)

helpline@diabetes.org.uk

www.diabetes.org.uk

Diabetes UK provides information and support to anyone concerned about or affected by diabetes. This includes advice on knowing your diabetes risk as well as learning to live well with diabetes.

Drinkaware

0300 123 1110 (Drinkline, 9am–8pm Monday–Friday;
11am–4pm Saturday–Sunday)
contact@drinkaware.co.uk
www.drinkaware.co.uk

Drinkaware is a UK-wide charity that provides independent alcohol advice, information and tools to help people make better choices about their drinking.

The Football Association (FA)

www.englandfootball.com/concussion

The FA is the governing body for football in England. This website provides information from The FA on how to recognise and manage a concussion.

Headway – the brain injury association

0808 800 2244 (helpline, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)
helpline@headway.org.uk
www.headway.org.uk

Headway is a charity that works to improve life after brain injury in the UK. It provides vital support and information services.

Help Me Quit Wales

0800 085 2219
helpmequit@wales.nhs.uk
www.helpmequit.wales

Help Me Quit is the NHS Stop Smoking service for people living in Wales.

Mind

0300 123 3393

info@mind.org.uk

www.mind.org.uk

Mind is a charity that provides advice and support for anyone with a mental health problem.

NHS.UK

www.nhs.uk

www.nhs.uk/better-health

(online support to make healthy lifestyle choices)

www.healthyliving.nhs.uk

(online support for people living with type 2 diabetes)

www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well

(information and guidance on eating well)

www.nhs.uk/eatwellguide

(the Eatwell Guide)

NHS.UK has resources to support you with getting active, quitting smoking, eating a more balanced diet and other healthy lifestyle changes.

Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke (NICHS)

028 9032 0184

mail@nichs.org.uk

www.nichs.org.uk

NICHS offers support for people and their families in Northern Ireland affected by chest, heart and stroke conditions. You can also book a Well Check on the NICHS website.

Quit smoking

0300 123 1044

www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking

Quit smoking is the free NHS service that offers advice and support to help people quit smoking. On the website, you can find quitting tips and local Stop Smoking Services. You can also download the NHS Quit Smoking app to track your progress.

Rugby Football Union (RFU)

www.englandrugby.com/run/player-welfare/headcase

The RFU is the governing body for rugby union in England. Its HEADCASE programme aims to increase understanding and provide information on concussion and other related topics, including how to prevent and manage suspected concussions.

Stroke Association

0303 3033 100 (helpline, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday;
10am–1pm Saturday)

helpline@stroke.org.uk

www.stroke.org.uk

The Stroke Association provides information and practical support for people who have had a stroke, and for their families or carers. The charity aims to help reduce people's risk of stroke through health education, funding research and campaigning for better services.

University of the Third Age (u3a)

020 8466 6139 (9.30am–4.30pm Monday–Friday)

info@u3a.org.uk

www.u3a.org.uk

u3a is a volunteer-led organisation that provides learning opportunities to retired and semi-retired people.

Volunteering Matters

020 3780 5870

info@volunteeringmatters.org.uk

www.volunteeringmatters.org.uk

Volunteering Matters is a charity that provides a range of volunteering programmes and opportunities.



Thanks to your donations, we're able to be a vital source of support and a powerful force for change for everyone living with dementia. Help us do even more, call **0330 333 0804** or visit **alzheimers.org.uk/donate**



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To give feedback on this publication, or for a list of sources, please email **publications@alzheimers.org.uk**

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At Alzheimer's Society we're working towards a world where dementia no longer devastates lives. We do this by giving help to everyone who needs it today, and hope for everyone in the future.

We have more information **About dementia**.

For advice and support on this, or any other aspect of dementia, call us on **0333 150 3456** or visit **alzheimers.org.uk**



Patient Information Forum



Office for Health
Improvement
& Disparities



**Alzheimer's
Society**

It will take a society to beat dementia

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43–44 Crutched Friars
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0330 333 0804
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