Is it Possible to Reduce the Risk of Dementia?

Remember the old game show that started on radio in the 1940s as the $64 Question and morphed into the $64,000 Question in the 1950s? This question about reducing the risk of dementia is more like the $64 Trillion Dollar Question!

Two recently published papers cautiously seem to answer “yes” to the question. Here are the modifiable risk factors that are currently being studied:

- Diabetes mellitus
- Midlife hypertension
- Midlife obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Depression
- Smoking
- Low educational attainment

Complicating these studies is the fact that these risk factors are interrelated. For example, people with higher educational attainment might have lower risk of dementia not only because they have built up “cognitive reserve” in their brains, but also because better educated people tend to be wealthier and thus have better access to healthcare. They also smoke less and exercise more than people with less education.

One study that accounted for the fact that these risk factors are interrelated found that about a third of all cases of Alzheimer’s disease could be related to these seven potentially modifiable factors. Interestingly, the greatest proportion of Alzheimer’s disease cases (about 13%) in the USA, Europe, and the UK (considered high-income countries) can be attributed to physical inactivity.

There’s good news and bad news in these reports. The good news is that in high-income countries, risk has been dropping in the last 20 years. In one area of England, in 2011, there was a 24% decrease in the number of expected dementia cases. Researchers think this is because of higher levels of education and better care for people with cardiovascular risk factors like hypertension, high cholesterol, and diabetes. The bad news, however, is that among younger adults, obesity and diabetes are increasing.

Both articles conclude that a concerted worldwide effort to address public health issues like diet and exercise could affect the future growth in dementia cases. It now appears that if people can be persuaded to maintain a healthy weight, reduce sugar intake, exercise regularly, stop smoking, and pursue life-long learning, we might be able to reduce the prevalence of dementia in the future.
