

Alzheimer's could be warded off by 'an intellectually, socially and physically active lifestyle', says new study

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Leisure, social and learning activities can help us ward off the cognitive decline that comes with Alzheimer's disease, a new study suggests. Image: REUTERS/Toru Hanai

This article is part of:

Shaping the Future of Health and Healthcare

- Leisure, social and learning activities can help us ward off the cognitive decline that comes with Alzheimer's disease, a new study suggests.
- Reading ability and the kind of work we do are also key factors in the resilience of our brains.
- Between 2030 and 2050, the proportion of older people in the population globally is predicted to rise from 78 million to 139 million.

Leisure activities like clubs, classes and sports aren't just enjoyable – they might also help [protect our brains from Alzheimer's disease](#), a new study shows.

Researchers found that taking part in activities and learning – as well as reading ability and type of work – were all factors that may affect the brain's "cognitive reserve" – its resilience to decline in older age.

[Alzheimer's disease](#) is the main cause of dementia – a group of symptoms including loss of memory and difficulty with problem-solving, language and thinking, explains UK dementia charity, the Alzheimer's Society.

Understanding Alzheimer's

The UK researchers wanted to know why some people with amyloid plaques in their brains that are associated with Alzheimer's showed no signs of the disease, while others with the same level of plaque had no memory or thinking problems.

They studied 1,184 people in the UK who were born in 1946 and had taken cognitive tests when they were eight years old and again at the age of 69.

At the ages of 26, 43 and 53, a 'cognitive reserve index' measured respectively the participants' education level, participation in "enriching leisure activities" and what jobs they were doing. Reading ability at the age of 53 was also tested – as a measure of overall

lifelong learning separate from education and occupation.

Activity boosts brain strength

Those who took part in six or more leisure activities, like adult education classes, clubs, social activities, volunteer work and gardening, scored 1.53 points more on average than others who took part in up to four leisure activities.

People with jobs at a professional or intermediate level scored 1.5 points more on average than those who worked in partly skilled or unskilled roles.

Those with a bachelor's degree or other higher education qualifications scored 1.22 points more on average than people with no formal education.

Higher childhood scores in cognitive skills, reading ability and the lifestyle factors of the study's cognitive reserve index were all associated with higher cognitive test scores at age 69.

Improving cognitive skills

Study author Dorina Cadar said the results were exciting because they show that cognitive ability can be affected by factors throughout our lives and that taking part in “an intellectually, socially and physically active lifestyle” may help fight off cognitive decline and dementia.

The results, published in [Neurology](#), suggest we can actively improve our cognitive resilience – the strength of our brains – throughout our lives, even if our childhoods were not enriching, the researchers say.

Michal Schnaider Beeri, a professor of psychiatry at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, said there may be broad public health and societal benefits in “investing in high education, widening opportunities for leisure activities and providing cognitive challenging activities for people, especially those working in less skilled occupations”.

It's a sentiment shared by Ty Greene, Health Equity Lead at the World Economic Forum. “The social determinants of health – that is, the non-medical factors that affect people's health and wellbeing such as education, income and housing – account for up to 55% of health outcomes,” says Greene. “As research grows on the disparity in health outcomes based on

social determinants of health, from varying levels of cognitive decline in people with Alzheimer's to the 18-year gap in life expectancy between high- and low- income countries, it has become evident that the responsibility to address health inequities does not lie solely with the healthcare sector.

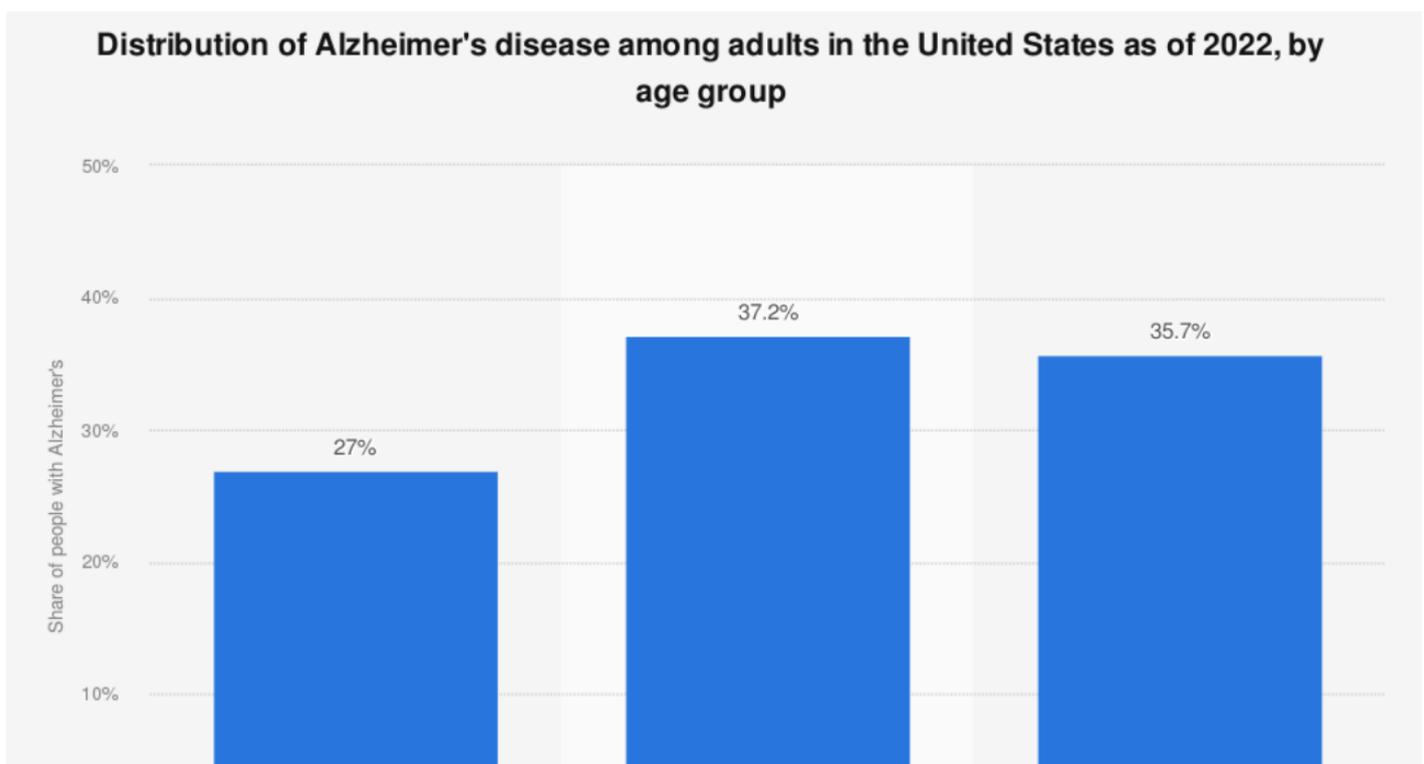
“The [World Economic Forum's Global Health Equity Network](#) aims to address disparities in health and wellbeing outcomes between and within countries by convening executive leaders across sectors and geographies to commit to prioritizing health equity action as core to their organizational strategies, operations and measurement.”

Populations are ageing

Around [55 million people globally have dementia](#), according to the World Health Organization. More than 60% of these live in low- and middle-income countries.

Worldwide, nearly every country is seeing its older population increase. Between 2030 and 2050, the proportion of older people in the population globally is predicted to rise from 78 million to 139 million.

For economies, [ageing populations](#) are linked with fewer working-age people and slower economic growth as a result, says the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While [Alzheimer's care worldwide cost around \\$1 trillion in 2018](#), according to Statista, and is expected to double by 2030.





Alzheimer's is currently the seventh leading cause of death in the US. Image: Statista

It means those who are in work have to pay more to support the elderly, the IMF says. Government budgets can also be strained by the cost of health and retirement spending. On the other hand, older workers can also mean higher wages and productivity, the IMF points out.

In a study on longevity, Stanford University in the United States said the [ageing population was a big opportunity](#) – but that big changes were also needed to current norms, policies and social institutions that mostly evolved in the past century.

By 2050, Stanford predicts that up to half of today's five-year-olds can expect to live for 100 years.

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