

Plain Language Summary: The impact of leisure activities reducing risks of dementia



Authors

Sizhen, Su et al. (2022)

Background

A recent study published in the journal [Neurology](#) highlighted work done at Peking University in China that suggested those who participate in mental activities such as listening to the radio may be better than physical exercise in reducing risks associated with dementia.

There are currently more than 64,000 people living with dementia in Ireland, with this number set to rise to more than 140,000 people by 2050, according to a report from Alzheimer Europe¹.

What work was done

Prof Lin Lu and researchers at Peking University Sixth Hospital reviewed 38 existing research studies to look at the effects of mental and social activities and risk of dementia. These

studies were compiled from worldwide research, involving more than 2 million people who currently did not have dementia. Participants were asked as part of a survey / interviews to document their leisure activities.

Leisure activities are those that people do for enjoyment or well-being such as playing tennis, crafting, playing an instrument etc. and are broken into three categories: mental, physical and social activities.

What was found

During the studies, almost 75,000 people developed dementia, and taking other factors into consideration, it was found that these leisure activities were linked to a reduced risk of dementia.

- Those who participated in mental activities such as reading, watching tv, listening to the radio, playing musical instruments and playing games had a 23% lower risk of dementia.
- Those who participated in physical activities such as walking, swimming, dancing and sports had a 17% lower risk of dementia.
- Those who participated in social activities such as attending a class, participating in a social club or volunteering had a 7% lower risk of dementia.

What this means

Whilst this study found that leisure activities were linked to a reduced risk of dementia, there is still conflicting evidence globally on the true impact of leisure activities in the prevention of dementia. Maintaining your social networks, staying active mentally and fit can support overall brain health compared to spending time alone and passive activities with very little mental stimulation.

What happens next

Researchers have suggested that whilst these findings are important, further research studies should be undertaken to include more people in the research and have a longer follow up time to truly identify the links between leisure activities and dementia.

While there is no cure for dementia, growing scientific evidence highlights the different ways you can help to reduce your risk of developing dementia. This includes being physically active; eat a healthy diet; take care of your heart; mentally challenge your brain; and be socially engaged.²

References

1. Alzheimer Europe (2020) Dementia in Europe Yearbook 2019 Estimating the Prevalence of Dementia in Europe. Available: https://www.alzheimer-europe.org/sites/default/files/alzheimer_europe_dementia_in_europe_yearbook_2019.pdf
2. The Alzheimer Society of Ireland (2018) Brain Health Matters. Available: <https://alzheimer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ASI-BrainHealth-Brochure-website-1.pdf>