

The Importance of Brain Health for LGBTQ+ Individuals

Key Takeaways:

- While some risk factors for dementia cannot be changed, such as genetics and age, other risk factors can potentially be modified.
- Improving heart health, exercising, getting high-quality sleep, and improving mental health may all positively affect brain health.
- LGBTQ+ older people with dementia may suffer disproportionately due to a lifetime of discrimination, but taking action now to improve brain health may positively impact health outcomes.

Why Is Brain Health Important?

A lifestyle promoting brain health can help the brain be more resistant to disease later in life, including Alzheimer's disease. Compared to other conditions, few people realize there are things they can do to lessen their risk of developing dementia. A recent report found that nearly half of all dementia cases could be prevented by acting to reduce certain risk factors.

What Makes a Brain Healthy?

A healthy brain allows a person to realize the full potential of their mental processes, including thinking, learning, remembering, judging, coping with emotions, and communicating. A healthy brain may also show resilience, which means that it can retain high functioning even in the presence of disease features in the brain.

What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a specific type of dementia. While Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia, not everyone with dementia has Alzheimer's disease.

In Alzheimer's disease, changes in the brain can begin up to 20 years before symptoms start. A healthy, resilient brain may help you maintain your ability to think and remember clearly even in the face of buildup of potentially toxic proteins in your brain.

Making certain lifestyle changes could reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia.

Learn more about Alzheimer's and dementia in the LGBTQ+ community here:

- Alz.org: LGBTQ Community Resources for Dementia
- sageusa.org/alzheimers-info

Why Should LGBTQ+ Elders Care About Brain Health?

LGBTQ+ older people face unique challenges including stigma, health disparities, and barriers in access to care. Being informed about brain health can help members of the LGBTQ+ community take steps to promote a healthy brain.

What Can Help Improve Brain Health?

- **Heart Health:** *What's good for the heart is good for the brain.* High blood pressure, midlife obesity, diabetes, and smoking all may have negative impacts on heart health; that may be why these factors also increase one's risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.
- **Exercise:** *Exercising strengthens both the heart and the brain.* Outside of risk factors that cannot be changed (for example, age and genetics), physical inactivity is one of the most common modifiable risk factors for Alzheimer's disease.
- **Sleep:** *Quality sleep and a healthy brain go hand in hand.* It's important to get a good night's sleep. Those with sleep impairment can have up to a 1.76-fold increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.
- **Mental Health:** *Mental wellness plays a role in brain health.* Those suffering from anxiety or depression are at a higher risk of developing dementia.

Older LGBTQ+ people are more likely to exhibit particular vulnerabilities that may put them at risk for Alzheimer's disease or exacerbate the impact of the disease.

- LGBTQ+ individuals often experience poorer mental health than heterosexual and cis-gender people, which may increase their risk for dementia. Additionally, research has shown excessive drinking and non-prescribed substance use among LGBTQ+ elders.
- LGBTQ+ elders also suffer a double impact from the stigma of being older and identifying as LGBTQ+. The effects of stigma can lead to diminished mental health and fear of discrimination, which can delay seeking care.
- Social isolation and the stress of being a marginalized person may contribute to poorer mental and physical health among LGBTQ+ older people. LGBTQ+ elders are more likely to age without a spouse or partner, more likely to live alone, and less likely to have children to support them.

Knowing how to improve brain health is critical to ensuring that older LGBTQ+ people can lower their risk of developing dementia. Making certain lifestyle changes can reduce the risk of cognitive decline or delay it.



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