



MEDIA RELEASE
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It's possible to reduce the risk of dementia: but 48% of us don't know it

Alzheimer's Australia calls for dementia to be on the health prevention agenda

Nearly half of Australia's adult population (48 per cent) are not aware that it's possible to reduce the risk of getting dementia, a new report by Alzheimer's Australia shows. The results have prompted Alzheimer's Australia to call for national and state governments to include dementia on the health prevention agenda including allocating funding for community education to raise the awareness about dementia and risk reduction.

Alzheimer's Australia's report *Dementia risk reduction: What do Australians know?*, released today at Parliament House, Canberra, at the Parliamentary launch of Dementia Awareness Week, is a review of a number of public surveys conducted since 1999 into community awareness about dementia risk reduction.

Glenn Rees, National Executive Director, Alzheimer's Australia, said the results should concern all Australians as dementia is projected to cost the Australian community \$8.2 billion by 2022-23.

"If the healthcare system is to survive in the future, risk reduction will no longer be a choice but a necessity. If we can delay the average onset of dementia by just five years, we will halve the number of people who develop the condition. Australians need to know that they can take steps to reduce their risk of developing dementia by changing their lifestyles. The resulting shift in public awareness could slow the growth of the dementia epidemic and significantly reduce the burden on the health care system and the wider community," said Rees.

"The more funding we have for raising public awareness about reducing the risk of dementia through Alzheimer's Australia's Mind your Mind program, the more likely Australians will be to adopt 'brain-healthy' lifestyles earlier."

The report not only highlighted a need to raise awareness that it is possible to reduce the risk of dementia, it also revealed a need to educate Australians about the link between cardiovascular risk factors and an increased risk of dementia.

The most recent consumer awareness survey cited in the report (Newspoll – April 2008) reveals that even those Australians who believe it is possible to reduce the risk of dementia have a concerning lack of knowledge of how they can do so. Of that group:

- only 0.4 per cent were able to suggest that reducing/controlling blood pressure would help to reduce the risk of dementia;
- just 0.2 per cent said that reducing high cholesterol would be a good idea; and
- only 3.7 per cent said that reducing or quitting smoking would help to reduce the risk.

Professor Alistair Burns, Alzheimer's Australia's visiting guest for Dementia Awareness Week, said, "There is little recognition in health prevention policies worldwide of the links between reducing the risk of dementia and other chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity. "

However, awareness levels among Australians about the benefits of keeping their brain active are more promising, with the report showing that 48 per cent of people who believe it's possible to reduce the risk of dementia were able to suggest, unprompted, that being mentally active will help.

Associate Professor Michael Woodward, Medical Director of Aged Care, Austin Health, said: "Dementia is soon going to be one of the most common illnesses in our society. It is a great shame that so few people are aware of the steps that can be taken now to reduce their risk of developing dementia later in life. This risk can be significantly reduced with simple healthy lifestyle strategies, which are outlined in Alzheimer's Australia's Mind your Mind program. "

The Mind your Mind program encourages people to follow seven 'signposts' to help reduce their risk of getting dementia. The program is based on scientific research that shows that certain healthy lifestyle habits can help to reduce the risk of dementia.

Alzheimer's Australia's report *Dementia risk reduction: What do Australians know?*, along with the Mind your Mind User's Guide, is available on the web at www.alzheimers.org.au or by calling the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

Alzheimer's Australia gratefully acknowledges the Australian Government as the principal sponsor of the Dementia Awareness Week, and Pfizer Australia who are supporting the Dementia Awareness Week for the eighth year in succession.

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Interviews:

- Professor Alistair Burns, Professor of Old Age Psychiatry, University of Manchester, UK
- Associate Professor Michael Woodward, Medical Director of Aged Care, Austin Health
- Glenn Rees, National Executive Director, Alzheimer's Australia

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Notes to editors:

- **Dementia Awareness Week, 19-26 September 2008**, this year carries the theme 'Mind your Mind – and reduce the risk of dementia'. The week encompasses World Alzheimer's Day on Sunday 21 September.
- **Dementia** is the term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in the functioning of a person's brain. The effects of dementia include loss of memory, intellect, rationality, social skills, and what would be considered normal emotional reactions. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which accounts for 50-70% of all cases.
- Currently there are an estimated 227,000 people with dementia in Australia, and this number is set to grow to 731,000 by 2050 unless there is a medical breakthrough. Across the country, nearly one million Australians are involved in the care of someone with dementia. While a lot more is now known about dementia, there is still no cure.
- Every seven seconds, somewhere in the world, a new case of dementia is diagnosed.