- Brain—diseases

Walking ‘around 7,000 steps’ daily can lower Alzheimer’s risk

Across the region, dementia cases are projected to rise by 367% by 2050

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A new study has shown that walking daily can significantly reduce the risk of cognitive decline, particularly among those genetically predisposed to Alzheimer’s disease. The research published in the Lancet Public Health revealed that the figure was associated with a reduced risk of serious health issues, including dementia.



Doctors in the UAE agree, stressing that regular walking enhances cardiovascular health, boosts blood flow to the brain, and stimulates brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which supports neuron growth and survival. This, they said, helps maintain memory, cognitive function, and overall brain health.

“Daily walking among older adults helps maintain cognitive function and delays dementia,” said Dr Noha Abdulwahid, Specialist Neurology, Medcare Royal Specialty Hospital. “Individuals with genetic risk (APOE e4 carriers) may experience greater cognitive benefits. Even small increases in daily walking significantly improve brain health.”

She noted that “around 7,000 steps per day” can lower the risk of chronic diseases and cognitive decline, adding that “at least 35 minutes per week of moderate-to-vigorous walking can reduce dementia risk by up to 41 per cent.”

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia in the UAE and a growing public health concern. The country spends an estimated $1.35 billion annually on dementia-related care, around 0.19 per cent of its GDP, according to Dr Poonam C. Awatare, Specialist Neurologist at International Modern Hospital Dubai.

Across the Mena region, dementia cases are projected to rise by 367 per cent by 2050, driven by longer lifespans and lifestyle-related risk factors, Awatare added.

For Anam Rizvi, her mother’s struggle with Alzheimer’s was a painful reminder of how the disease erases connections. “I realised that my mother was gradually losing her memory, often straining to recall my name, until one day, she no longer remembered me,” said Rizvi. Medication only managed her mother’s symptoms, offering “brief moments of clarity amid the fog of forgetting.”

Similarly, Rami Abadi shared how Alzheimer’s affected his father’s coordination. “My father began to forget his steps. Muscle weakness, slower reflexes, and difficulty judging distances often led to his frequent falls. I realised Alzheimer’s takes away more than memories, it takes away balance, too,” he said.

Lifestyle choices

Experts emphasise that lifestyle choices, including walking, diet, and cognitive engagement, can help reduce risk. Dr Asma Mushtaque, Specialist Neurology, Burjeel Medical Centre, Al Shamkha, said, “Daily walking keeps blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol under control, all common conditions in the region linked to dementia.”

She also recommended a Mediterranean-style diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish, and olive oil, along with adequate vitamin D, regular mental activity, and sufficient sleep. “Older adults and those with a family history of dementia should undergo periodic cognitive screening for early detection,” she added.

Awatare explained that “exercise like walking stimulates neurotrophic factors (such as BDNF), supports synaptic plasticity, and reduces inflammation and oxidative stress in the brain — all of which are mechanisms implicated in Alzheimer’s pathology.”

Measurable benefits

She noted that even modest physical activity offers measurable benefits. “A study showed that about 3,800 steps per day were associated with a 25 per cent lower risk of dementia. Another found that just five additional minutes of moderate activity per day can help reduce dementia risk.”

Awatare said that walking for 30 minutes most days of the week is an effective starting point, adding that “fitness reduces dementia risk even in people with high genetic risk.” Combining walking with resistance, balance, and flexibility exercises provides broader benefits, while mental stimulation, healthy diet, and stress management further protect brain function.

“Walking is one of the easiest, safest, and cost-effective interventions we can recommend to support brain health,” said Awatare. “While it cannot fully eliminate Alzheimer’s risk, mounting evidence shows it can delay onset, slow decline, and complement other lifestyle strategies.”