- Brain—diseases

# Oops, don't forget!

## On brain health and avoiding cognitive disorders

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Thinking abilities naturally and gradually decline with age. Maybe you have noticed your parents or grandparents are now slower to process information, and find it harder to multitask and remember some information. Usually, this is normal, especially when it doesn't affect one's day-to-day activities. What is not normal is when their thinking ability starts to decline faster such that they may display abnormal behaviors and changes in mood and personality, they ask questions over and over, they regularly trip or lose their balance, or they forget familiar people, places, or recent events. When this happens, reversal might be too late and impossible, depending on its severity. Fortunately, there are ways to determine the factors that put one at a higher risk for cognitive decline, as well as lifestyle changes that one can adapt as early as now to prevent or lower their risk of cognitive disorders such as dementia, Parkinson's Disease, or Alzheimer's disease. This is why it is important to start taking care of your brain as much as you take care of your body.



The World Health Organization (WHO) says that because of the growing elderly population, those who will experience cognitive decline will also grow in the coming years. WHO says that currently, 35.6 million individuals worldwide have dementia and that the number will nearly double every 20 years, with majority living in developing countries.

The Philippines follows the same trend when it comes to the aging population. According to a Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) report, the country is expected to become an aging population by 2025-2030 based on projections. While PSA has noted that life expectancy has increased among Filipinos, there are looming health concerns for the aging population, one of which is the risk of cognitive diseases. This is an issue raised by geneticist, nutritionist (RNutr), and fitness professional (AusRep) Dr. Denise Furness, PhD, BSc(Hons) Rnutr during PRIMA's recent webinar entitled "Brain health and cognitive decline: A functional medicine approach to healthy aging." Unfortunately, there is no treatment for cognitive diseases.

Dr. Furness, however, says that because cognitive decline begins as early as 20 to 25 years even before symptoms appear, it can be addressed and reversed earlier with medical interventions. This begins with knowing the major risk factors for cognitive decline. Dr. Furness says that there are non-modifiable and modifiable factors, which account for one's level of risk. Non-modifiable factors include age and genetics. Modifiable ones include lifestyle factors such as smoking, excessive alcohol, physical inactivity, poor diet, and health conditions that include hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular diseases. Even if cognitive decline is genetic, however, it doesn't mean one will have it. As Dr. Furness says, diet and lifestyle changes could already lower one's risk even with genetic predisposition. These changes include:

- regular physical activity
- a healthy diet, particularly a Mediterranean diet that is rich in fruits and vegetables, legumes, whole grains, some fish and poultry and healthy fats
- maintaining a healthy weight

• getting enough sleep
• minimizing exposure to toxins
• practicing mindfulness
• maintaining social activities
• exercising the brain with puzzles and memory games

As mentioned above, these preventive lifestyle and diet changes are

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best done while still young. Even more so because in the Philippines, the top causes of mortality include cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, cancers, and diabetes mellitus, according to the Department of Health. Most of these diseases are, unfortunately, among the risk factors for cognitive decline as well. This is why it is encouraged to modify your diet and lifestyle as early as now to have a long, healthy life ahead.