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Exercise Prevents Late-Life Cognitive Decline in Latinos

Midlife cardiovascular issues contribute to dementia risk later in life, but risk factors vary by ethnicity.

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Engaging in physical activity and managing blood sugar levels in midlife were associated with slower cognitive decline later in life, according to a study published in Alzheimer's & Dementia: Behavior & Socioeconomics of Aging. The results differed by ethnicity, with Latinos benefiting from exercise more than other groups.

"By improving cardiovascular health through modifiable lifestyle changes, there is a potential to meaningfully alleviate the public health burden of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, particularly in high-risk populations," said co–senior study author Claudia Satizabal, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Population Health Sciences at UT Health San Antonio and its Glenn Biggs Institute for Alzheimer's and Neurodegenerative Diseases, in a press release.

An estimated 7.4 million Americans, or one in every nine, over age 65 are living with Alzheimer's dementia, according to a 2026 report from the Alzheimer's Association. Nearly 75% of those with Alzheimer's are over age 75. Researchers estimate that 42% of Americans over age 55 will eventually develop some kind of dementia, according to the National Institutes of Health, and the aging of the U.S. population is expected to cause new dementia cases to double by 2060.

Cardiovascular issues during midlife are known to contribute to cognitive decline and dementia later in life. People with atrial fibrillation, a common irregular heartbeat disorder, have a 39% greater risk of developing memory problems; adults with heart disease have a 27% higher risk of developing dementia; and up to 50% of people experience cognitive decline following a heart attack, according to the American Heart Association.

For the study, researchers from the University of Texas Health San Antonio and University of Texas Rio Grande Valley followed the cognitive and cardiovascular health of 402 participants in the San Antonio Heart Study (1979–1988) who later participated in the San Antonio Longitudinal Study of

Aging (1992–2004).

Midlife cardiovascular health was assessed using Life's Simple 7, a framework encompassing three behavioral factors (healthy diet, nonsmoking and physical activity) and four health factors (blood pressure, body mass index, total cholesterol and fasting blood glucose). Cognition was measured up to four times using the Mini-Mental State Examination, an 11-question screening test to check memory, attention and thinking skills.

Of the San Antonio participants, 52% were Latino; the remainder were white. Fasting blood glucose, body mass index and blood pressure were higher among Latinos than white people living in the same income neighborhoods.

Exercising (regardless of activity) was associated with slower cognitive decline among Latinos. Normal or overweight body mass index status was associated with accelerated rates of cognitive decline. Fasting blood glucose levels below 126 milligrams per deciliter or lower were associated with slower cognitive decline among white people.

"The longitudinal exploration of cardiovascular health throughout life, rather than assessing it at a single time point, could also provide further insight into the trajectory phenotypes contributing to cognitive decline by ethnicity," said first study author Janette Vazquez, PhD, a senior postdoctoral research fellow at the Glenn Biggs Institute.

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