COPD and Dementia: What Is the Link?

by BRENDA VANTA

Is There a Connection Between COPD and Dementia?

The link between chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung and heart complications is well known, but what about the risk of memory problems and even dementia for COPD sufferers? And if the risk is higher, is there anything you can do to keep your brain healthy and your memory sharp?

Research

A 2014 study published in *JAMA Neurology* suggests COPD significantly increases the risk of developing mild cognitive impairments. COPD sufferers who participated in the study, aged 70-89, had an 83 percent increased risk of developing so called non-amnesic mild cognitive impairment — a condition that affects thinking skills other than memory.

For the subjects who had been diagnosed with COPD more than five years, the risk for the same cognitive problems increased to 158 percent. The authors of this study noted that previous research found a correlation between COPD and problems with attention, memory and brain function.

These changes in cognitive function may be explained in few ways. COPD is linked with higher than normal inflammatory markers and an increased risk for heart conditions — both of which influence cognitive function. COPD also causes low levels of oxygen in the brain, which can lead to inflammation and death of brain cells, explaining cognitive impairments.

The risk of dementia is naturally higher in older COPD patients, and dementia speeds up the progression of COPD.

Tips to Prevent Memory Problems

Manage COPD Symptoms

Not only does good management decrease the risk of dementia, but also the risk of other complications like pneumonia, heart failure, and other lung and heart conditions.

Improve Your Lifestyle

If you smoke, quit as soon as possible. Adopt a healthy COPD diet, with plenty of nutrients that keep your brain healthy — for example fresh fruits and vegetables are a great source of vitamins, minerals and various phytochemicals with antioxidant qualities.

Antioxidants protect the your brain and body's cells against free radicals, which are involved in dementia and other degenerative conditions. Nuts, seeds and fish contain omega-3 fatty acids, which have anti-inflammatory

qualities and promote the optimal function of your brain.

Stay Fit and Active

This is important — your lungs and heart will function better, and so will be your brain. Make sure you talk with a physiotherapist or fitness expert to learn about the exercise you can do safely.

You can also use yoga or tai chi to better help connect your body with your mind, both of which also emphasize various breathing techniques.

Keep Your Brain Fit

You can do this by regularly doing mind-sharpening activities. You can download free apps on your phone, or you can play these games on the computer.

Here are a few games you may want to consider to improve your memory, problem solving skills and language skills:

- Shapes and Colors is a game designed to improve your visual memory.
- Writing in the Stars is a crossword puzzle that helps improve your problem-solving skills abilities.
- The Squeaking Mouse is a fun game that strengthens your visual and auditory memory.