

Nose picking and dementia? Too soon to link

From a young age, we're told to keep our fingers out of our nose for several reasons. But has a new rationale – one with implications for our brain and aging – emerged?

A [recent study](#) on mice in Australia linked damage inside the nose to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. The researchers claim damage to the nasal mucosa membrane makes it easier for bacteria to enter the brain via the olfactory nerve. This, they say, leads to the development of amyloid beta plaques, a hallmark of Alzheimer's.

[Courtney McFarlin, PA](#), is a primary care provider at OSF HealthCare who specializes in memory care and dementia. She says much more research is needed to see if this study will hold its own weight. But there are plenty of other ways to help stave off the memory loss that comes with dementia.

McFarlin says dementia is typically seen in your 60s, but it can start to develop as soon as your 30s. A person or their caregiver might notice they forgot a loved one's name. The person may appear unkempt, or they may make odd mistakes like leaving their car keys in the refrigerator. An evaluation in a health care provider's office can determine whether the mistakes are dementia, mild cognitive impairment or just aging.

Tests include:

- A depression screening. "There are non-dementia things that can lead to cognitive and behavioral changes. Depression is one," McFarlin says.
- A [mini mental state exam](#). Questions like: what day of the week is it? Can you spell "world" backwards? Can you recall what we were talking about two minutes ago? Plus, the provider will ask the person to write or draw something basic.
- A clock draw test. That's where a person is given a blank clock face and is told to draw the numbers and hands to a specific time.

"We encourage caregivers who are directly involved with the patient to come in during those evaluations," McFarlin says. "Sometimes the patient themselves doesn't see these things happening. It's more the people around them."

Dementia treatment could involve medication or daily activities to keep your brain sharp.

"Your brain is a muscle," McFarlin says. "Just like any other muscle, if you don't want your brain to waste away and become flabby and underused, exercise that muscle."

Crossword puzzles, reading a book or newspaper and doing jobs around the house like folding washcloths are all good ideas. McFarlin often suggests to patients that they watch the game show Jeopardy! because it requires reading, listening and thinking.

For younger people wanting to avoid dementia, McFarlin repeats what any doctor will tell you: live a healthy life. Eat healthy food, exercise and avoid excess alcohol. She says research has also found head trauma, like hits on a football field, is associated with dementia.

So what about your nose? It's still a good idea to keep your finger away. It's unsightly and can spread germs. But the Australia study just doesn't provide enough evidence to definitively link frequent nose picking to dementia, McFarlin again suggests. If you are congested, blow your nose into a tissue or handkerchief, or take a decongestant. If you have long nose hairs, a short trim is OK, but don't pluck them. McFarlin says those hairs help block bacteria from getting into our body.

Learn more about brain care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).