

## PROMOTING HEALTHY LIFE STYLE TO PREVENT COGNITIVE DETERIORATION IN LATE LIFE

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During the past few decades, the aging of the populations has become a worldwide phenomenon, no longer confined to the western societies alone. The increased number of elderly persons reflects the enhanced quality in societal structure and health care. At the same time, the aging population poses great public health challenges as the number people likely to be affected by age-related diseases will increase dramatically. Epidemiological and population-based studies aimed at identifying risk factors and promoting health in the elderly, are playing a leading role in aging research.

We aimed to describe the health status of 75+ years old persons by examining medical aspects, identifying major causes of ill-health, and detecting preventive strategies (primary and secondary prevention) that can improve older people's health. Three major patterns emerged:

- HEALTH STATUS appears to be surprisingly good, as 20% of the elderly are free from severe chronic diseases;
- MULTIMORBIDITY is a special disease pattern which has a strong association with increasing age;
- DEMENTIA and other neurological diseases are major causes of ill-health.

Studying multimorbidity and dementia in detail points to the following major findings:

*Multimorbidity* is the most common disease panorama in the elderly, and is a concept that needs further research. Today there are no known strategies on how to prevent multimorbidity, but its effects could be modified through more coordinated strategies by the society. Few studies have explored the specific causes and disease pathways of multimorbidity, which affects women and low educated people more than other social groups.

*Dementia* is one of the most common diseases, although rare before the age of 60. It is a specific syndrome affecting older people, and it increases with age. Over 50% of the population 95+ years are affected. The occurrence is even higher if we take into account mild cognitive impairment, which is an emerging relevant disorder from a public health and clinical perspective. Dementia shortens life and is one of the major causes of functional disability and institutionalisation.

Although many aspects of dementia are still not well understood, two major preventative strategies can be proposed from the current scientific evidence:

1. GOOD CONTROL OF BLOOD PRESSURE BOTH IN MIDDLE AGE AND LATE LIFE. Control of blood pressure and other vascular risk factors can be recommended, not only to prevent circulatory diseases, but also to decrease the risk of dementia.
2. MENTALLY ACTIVE AND SOCIALLY INTEGRATED LIFE IN OLD AGE. The increased risk for dementia derived from genetic predisposition and life time exposure to different risk factors (such as low education, low socio-economic status and high blood pressure) can still be modulated by psychosocial factors (such as rich social network and mental stimulation) during old age.