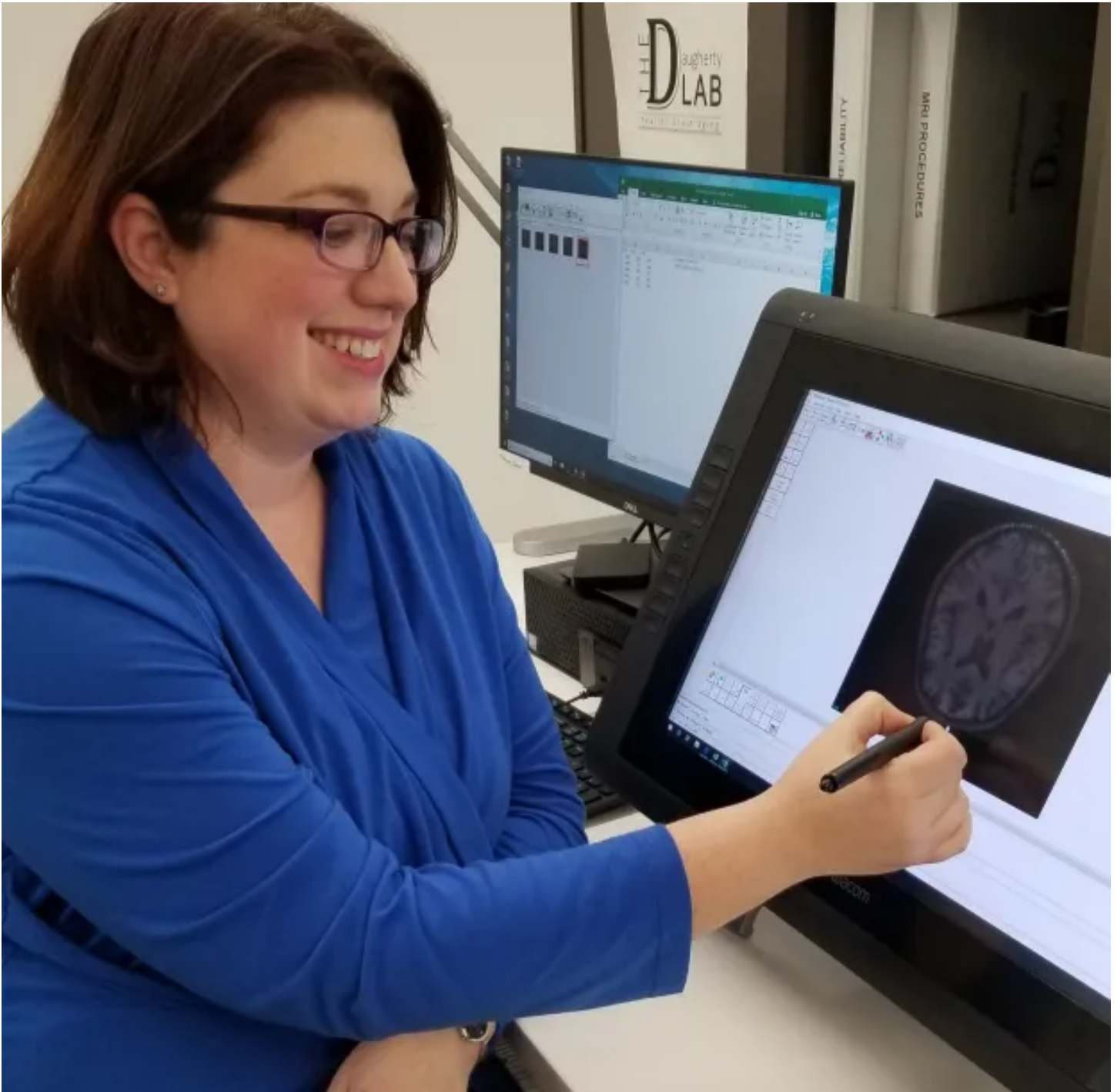


Lifestyle changes to keep your brain healthy

Area Agency On Aging 1 B

People age differently. But only 30% of those differences are due to our genetic makeup.

The remaining 70% are due to the way we live – our diet and exercise habits, how much sleep we get, our engagement with friends and family, and our environment all play a role.



Ana Daugherty, PhD, is a neuroscientist at the Institute of Gerontology, Wayne State University, where she runs the Healthy Brain Aging Lab. (Photo courtesy of Area Agency on Aging 1-B)

Ana Daugherty, PhD, a neuroscientist in the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University who runs the Healthy Brain Aging Lab there, says that preventing or slowing brain decline means eliminating the risk factors that are within our control.

For example, researchers know that vascular disease, a category that includes clogged arteries or other conditions of the circulatory system, plays a role in Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

Having diabetes, high blood pressure and metabolic syndrome, all related to heart health, puts people at higher risk of brain decline.

“One of the most important things you can do is take care of the heart,” Daugherty says. That starts in early life: the choices you make in your 20s will affect your brain in your 70s, she says.

Diet

What you put in your mouth affects your brain.

A recent study in [JAMA Neurology](#) found that eating highly processed food – those with artificial color and flavors and preservatives – speeds up the development of dementia. The study followed 10,000 adults 35 to 74 years old at four-year intervals for about nine years. Researchers found that those whose daily diet consisted of at least 20% highly processed foods scored worse on tests for word recall, word recognition and verbal fluency tests. Their cognitive decline was more than 25% faster, researchers found.





Include more whole grains, fish, fruit and veggies in your diet to maximize brain health. (Photo courtesy of Metro Creative Connection)

The takeaway? Staying away from foods that are manufactured rather than grown is a step in the right direction. Include more whole grains, fish, fruit and veggies in your diet to maximize brain health.

Diets that are considered both balanced and protective of your health are the Mediterranean and DASH (a plan with less sodium to help hypertension) diets.

Daugherty says it is also about how much of certain types of food you eat, as well. Eating a lot of cheese frequently, for example, contributes to higher levels of sodium. Watch your alcohol intake, too.

Evidence shows that excess drinking also boosts the risk for dementia, heart disease, liver failure and general frailty.

Exercise

Daily exercise is also considered a hedge against brain decline.



Daily exercise is considered a hedge against brain decline. (Photo courtesy of Metro Creative

Connection)

A [2022 study](#) in the UK involving more than 78,000 adults between 40 and 79 years old found that walking just under 10,000 steps a day decreased the risk for dementia. Even taking half that number of steps each day had a brain benefit.

Daugherty says that any activity that raises your heart rate is good for your heart and muscular strength and hence, brain health. That could mean a brisk walk through Target or around the neighborhood, or even a couple hours gardening. The goal should be to do 150 minutes of activity each week that raises your heart rate.

Sleep

If you're in midlife, sleeping at least seven hours a night can protect against dementia and early death.

A few studies have shown the link between short nights and brain decline. One of them, published in 2021, involved 2,800 participants who were 65 and older. After five years, research found that those who got five or fewer hours of sleep per night and those who did not sleep well had a higher incidence of dementia and early death. The study also found that the participants who felt refreshed during the day had a lower risk of developing dementias.

See your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping.

Thinking

Hobbies and activities that engage the mind can reduce the risk of all-cause dementia, Daugherty says. Cognitive engagement is anything that gets you thinking. That could be puzzles and board games or hobbies like knitting and learning a new language. Traveling and even dancing that involves learning steps are both protective of the brain.

Socializing

Connecting with family and friends leads to lower rates of anxiety and higher levels of well-being. It also seems to be linked with lower cognitive decline. Even introverts can benefit from being engaged with a community.

The upshot?

You can't do anything about your genes, but you can maintain a healthy lifestyle. Even at the age of 70, Daugherty says, you strengthen your defenses against dementia.

Story courtesy of Area Agency on Aging 1-B