

The Link Between Dementia and Sleep

by Brooke DeNisco

A British study about the connection between dementia and sleep tracked the sleep patterns of 8,000 men and women for 25 years. According to results of the study published in April 2021, they found that people who slept six hours or less a night during their 50s and 60s were 30% more likely to be diagnosed with dementia than people who slept at least seven hours a night. The average age for a dementia diagnosis was 77. The study did not specify types of dementia like Alzheimer's or vascular dementia.

Study participants self-reported their sleep times for part of the study, but accelerometers were also used to measure sleep times to ensure they were accurate.

One of the study's potential flaws is that the subjects did not represent a perfect cross-section of the population; there was a higher percentage of white and college-educated participants than in the British population.

Researchers admit the possibility that poor sleep is a symptom of dementia rather than a cause of it. There is evidence that Alzheimer's disease and other dementias disrupt people's sleep. But the people in the study did not exhibit any signs of dementia when the study began.

There are several theories about why sleeping less could cause or exacerbate dementia. Brain autopsies of those who suffered from Alzheimer's show plaques formed by amyloid protein. It is possible that the body clears the brain of amyloid protein during sleep. Or, that the body only makes amyloid protein when it is awake. Sleep-deprived people show a higher concentration of amyloid protein in their cerebrospinal fluid. Another possibility is that dementia is a genetic disease, and the same genes that cause it also cause insomnia or just a need for less sleep.

Some people who participated in the study took sleeping pills, but, if they got seven or more hours of sleep a night, they did not develop dementia at a higher rate than people who slept unaided by medicine. It is generally thought that sleep quality goes down when people take medicine to sleep, but that didn't seem to matter.

The results of the study were published in the journal [*Nature Communications*](#). There has not been a longer or larger study about dementia and sleep.