

PROMOTING BRAIN HEALTH and HEALTHY AGING

PROBLEM

Across the lifespan, several modifiable risk factors are associated with an increased risk of developing future cognitive impairment including smoking, getting little to no physical activity, and having chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. A growing number of Texans are living with these risk factors, increasing their risk of developing cognitive decline and possibly developing Alzheimer’s or another dementia.

In 2015, 13.1% of Texans aged 45 and older reported experiencing subjective cognitive decline (SCD) — that is, a self-reported increase in memory problems or confusion that has gotten worse over the previous 12 months. SCD is one of the earliest noticeable symptoms of cognitive impairment and is strongly associated with an increased risk of developing Alzheimer’s or another dementia in the future.

Risk Factor Prevalence, by SCD Presence

Risk Factor	Among Texans Aged 45+ Without SCD	Among Texans Aged 45+ With SCD
Current Smoker	11.7%	23.3%
Little/No Regular Physical Activity	30.2%	43.6%
Cardiovascular Disease	11.8%	34.0%
Diabetes	17.5%	34.7%
Stroke	3.6%	14.3%

Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2015

SOLUTION

Public education is a fundamental public health role and helping people take action that promotes brain health requires clear and consistent messaging about what is known and what is yet to be discovered. By raising awareness about risk factors associated with cognitive decline, public health can accelerate awareness about the interplay between brain health and physical health. Reducing the risk of future cognitive impairment relates to two strategic actions (E-1 and E-2) of the Healthy Brain Initiative’s (HBI) *State and Local Public Health Partnerships to Address Dementia: The 2018-2023 Road Map*.

June is Alzheimer’s and Brain Awareness Month (ABAM). During ABAM 2018, the Harris County Public Health Department (HCPHD) in Texas conducted a targeted public awareness effort on brain health in the community. This included releasing a public service announcement (PSA), articles on brain health in their monthly newsletter and conducting two community educational events. HCPHD partnered closely with the Houston & Southeast Texas chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association throughout this effort.

HCPDH adapted an existing PSA from the New Mexico Department of Health to fit the needs of their local communities. The short 60-second announcement identifies ten healthy behaviors Texans can take that

will help protect their brain and potentially reduce their risk for future cognitive decline. These behaviors include increasing physical activity, eating a healthy and balanced diet, quitting smoking, and paying close attention to heart health. Adapted from the Alzheimer's Association *10 Ways to Love Your Brain* campaign, the PSA features a diverse cast of all ages, helping the public identify with the messages across the lifespan.

In their monthly newsletter, HCPHD included two articles on cognitive health including the importance of brain health and explaining lifestyle modifications that may reduce the risk of cognitive decline among the general population. HCPHD also conducted two community educational events at which the Houston & Southeast Texas chapter presented the Alzheimer's Association's *Healthy Living for your Brain and Body: Tips from the Latest Research*. These educational events were designed to increase understanding of the interplay between brain health and physical health and to teach participants about healthy behaviors that help protect cognition.

The HCPHD Nutrition and Chronic Disease Prevention branch, which led the public awareness effort, oversees the county's tobacco cessation efforts as well as programming to promote better nutrition and increased physical activity. Conducting this campaign during ABAM brought increased attention to brain health as a public health issue and allowed for additional media engagement.

INITIAL OUTCOMES

The public awareness project achieved the following:

- The PSA was posted across HCPHD and the Houston and Southeast Texas Chapter's social media accounts reaching nearly 6,000 impressions
- The two community educational events had over 315 combined participants

This effort has led to further collaborative projects between HCPHD and the Alzheimer's Association including a partnership on a community engagement day to provide older adults with social interaction and physical activity and plans to incorporate brain health messaging into existing relevant public health campaigns.

Additional local public health departments in Dallas County, the City of Wichita, and the City of Abilene have undertaken a similar effort, adapting the PSA to educate their own communities.

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