Australians are living longer, but with improved life expectancy comes the increased risk of illnesses such as dementia, Parkinson’s disease and stroke. Research is a slow process, and the answers we are seeking will take hard work and time to find. What we do know today, though, is that there are a few simple things you can do to maintain your brain health.

**Quit smoking and drink alcohol in moderation**
Excessive drinking damages brain cells and smoking cigarettes increases your risk of having a stroke, dementia, heart attack and developing certain cancers. By contrast, mild-moderate alcohol intake (up to two standard glasses per day) may actually be protective against cardiovascular disease and dementia.

**Stay physically active**
Walk, run, swim, cycle or play golf and reduce your risk of stroke, diabetes and heart disease. Even after a stroke, exercise is important. You can retrain the brain to compensate for the damage and increase your chances of regaining speech and movement.

**Stay mentally active**
Whether you learn a new language, play bridge, or tackle a crossword, you are exercising your brain. Our scientists have shown in experiments with mice that they can delay the onset of Huntington’s disease symptoms simply by keeping them mentally and physically active.

**Detect and treat high blood pressure**
High blood pressure is a risk factor for dementia and stroke. Get your blood pressure checked and if it is high, make sure it is treated.

**Reduce your stress levels**
Stress impairs your brain’s ability to think clearly and function normally. Take up yoga, meditate, laugh, exercise, or care for a pet.

**Increase folic acid (folate)**
This B vitamin can decrease your risk of heart disease and stroke. Good sources of folic acid include: beans and other legumes, leafy green vegetables, asparagus, nuts, oranges and folate-enriched breakfast cereals.

**Take antioxidants in your diet**
Antioxidants are substances that mop up free radicals, which are implicated in illnesses including cancer and heart disease and dementia. Florey scientists have recently shown that antioxidants in red wine, green tea, prunes and blueberries can prevent the brain cells that are damaged in Parkinson’s disease from dying. Antioxidant-rich foods might slow the progression of Parkinson’s disease in its early stages.

**Eat omega-3**
Salmon, sardines, mackerel and flax seeds and walnuts are some sources that contain omega-3 essential fatty acids, or EFAs, which the body needs to make brain chemicals and cell membranes.

**Recognise the signs of stroke and act quickly**
These include: weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg; difficulty speaking or swallowing; dizziness; loss of vision and headaches. Seek medical help quickly if you suspect a stroke. Patients who get to hospital early increase their chances of a good outcome.

**Talk to your doctor**
Many people think they have dementia when memory loss is actually due to stress, depression, illness or medications, so it’s important to rule those out. On the other hand, an early diagnosis for dementia means that you can access support services, information and medication, and make plans for the future.