

Haskell

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Armed with new confidence, I tackled the lilac. As the video instructed, I sawed out about a third of the thickest, oldest growth, which immediately opened up the center of the bush. I cut off branches that were rubbing against other branches, which was a lot of them. The tallest, gangliest branches came out, too, or at least got lopped off shorter. I snipped out armloads of suckers, and learned in the process to identify a

new, young shoot that will actually amount to something. When I stepped back at the end of an hour to survey the results, I could almost see my lilac relaxing. Air and sunlight filled its core. The trimmed branches were free to lift and wave in the wind coming off the river. Whatever small damage my inexpert technique might have done was minor compared to the great benefit of having pared the bush down to its essential lilac-ness. In time, as I tend it more routinely, I'll come to understand the lilac's growth habits and anticipate its needs. Already I know more than I did a

week ago. It will produce fewer blooms this coming spring as a result of this hard pruning, but they will be bigger and healthier. The bush will send out new, compact growth and use less energy supporting overgrown branches and useless suckers. We also won't have to worry about poking out an eye when we mow around it. Maybe Douglas will even muster some affection for this venerable life form that has survived on our windswept hillside far longer than we have, now that its more elemental presence adds to the spare beauty around us.

Singer

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Stop Hypertension, or "DASH", or a combination of the two. The DASH diet had previously been shown to improve both cognitive function and coordination when combined with a weight-loss program in people with high blood pressure who were both sedentary and obese. The participants' diets were characterized as conforming to either the Mediterranean-style diet or the "DASH" diet based on questionnaires. They called this combination of Mediterranean and hypertension diet "MIND," an acronym of Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay, and they analyzed the relative benefits of both diets to subsequent risk of cognitive decline while controlling for other important variables that may affect risk for dementia from Alzheimer's disease.

Before this Rush University study, neither the Mediterranean nor the DASH diets had previously been shown to reduce risk of developing dementia. In this study, people who followed the MIND diet, either very closely or moderately closely, had the lowest chance of developing dementia from Alzheimer's disease, with only 47 percent risk compared to those with very low compliance scores. The combined diet seemed to provide more benefit; only those who had very high compliance for either Mediterranean or DASH diet alone had lower dementia risk. They conclude that strict adherence to any of the three diets reduced risk of cognitive decline, but that even moderate adherence to the combined diet (MIND) reduced risk as well.

The risk reduction found in this study was fairly profound and needs to be confirmed in subsequent studies. This was not a randomized study and does not prove cause and effect. A person could argue that people who take better care of themselves in other ways or are better educated would be more likely to follow these healthier diets, but these results held true even when the investigators controlled for other variables that could affect cognitive aging: age, sex, education level, genes and the degree to which people participated in cognitively stimulating activities and physical activity. The slowing in cognitive decline was estimated to be equivalent to being 7.5 years younger with respect to risk of dementia. The benefits of the diets are thought to be due to their rich concentrations of nutrients with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. There are theoretical reasons to believe these mechanisms are important to brain aging and to development of dementia from

Alzheimer's disease, but are not specific for Alzheimer's disease. It is likely that these diets reduce risk of developing vascular disease that is another common cause of cognitive decline and dementia. I should also mention that these diets have shown benefit in reducing heart disease and depression as well as cognitive decline.

I'm looking forward to future studies in which people are randomly assigned to a particular diet and followed over several years to see what happens to memory, cognition, walking speed and other measures of brain aging. But I think the evidence we now have is sufficiently strong to make some recommendations about diet. I work in the Mood and Memory Clinic for older adults at Acadia Hospital. We always make a point of discussing "brain-healthy habits" with our patients and families. We encourage getting adequate sleep, increas-

ing physical activity, engaging in challenging mental activities and practicing stress-reduction techniques. There is growing evidence that all these habits may slow brain aging and help preserve memory, mood and mobility. We have always spent a few moments discussing "brain-healthy" diets with our patients, but with these data from the Rush University Memory and Aging Project, we will have to make this more of an emphasis. I encourage you to take your questions about diet and your health to either your primary care provider or a registered dietitian.

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