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"Crosswords may hold the solution to delaying dementia"

People who are most intellectually active in later life appear to delay the onset of dementia by as much as five years

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If you take up The Times cryptic crossword in your eighties, there's a good chance you'll still be doing it into your nineties.

A study has found that people who are most intellectually active in later life appear to delay the onset of dementia by as much as five years.

It wasn't possible to definitively prove causality, but the findings, published in the journal Neurology, add to the "use it or lose it" theory of cognition.

"Over a lifetime you're training your brain and reinforcing connections that support thinking and memory," Professor Robert Wilson, from Rush University in Chicago, said.

It isn't that such people don't get Alzheimer's, but that the disease takes longer to affect thinking, he believes. "Ultimately it takes more pathology to disrupt those systems in a brain that is prepared, shall we say, for old age."

For his research, he followed 2,000 older people, none of whom had dementia at the start of the trial. Each was asked how often they read books and newspapers, wrote letters and did puzzles, and was given a score.

Over an average of seven years about a quarter developed Alzheimer's. The timing, though, appeared to be linked to their hobbies. Those in the top 10 per cent of scores who developed Alzheimer's did so at 94, on average, while those in the lowest 10 per cent did so at 89.

"We can all work these cognitively stimulating activities into our daily lives," Wilson added.

A key question is whether the effect really is causal. Could it be that the people with the least intellectual activity in the study already had hidden dementia, which is why they did less?

To attempt to rule this out, the scientists conducted post-mortem examinations on 700 of those who had died during the trial, examining their brains for signs of toxic proteins associated with Alzheimer's. They found no correlation between cognitive activity at the start of the trial and the progression of the disease. The brains were physically the same, but somehow those who read more and did more puzzles were better able to hide it.

Dr Katy Stubbs, from Alzheimer's Research UK, said that a key message about dementia is that we have the power to reduce our risk of getting it.

"Evidence suggests that keeping the brain active may help boost cognitive reserve, a kind of resilience that allows our brains to resist damage for longer. This research supports the 'use it or lose it' idea."