

Over 14,000 Vermont adults 65 years and older are estimated to have Alzheimer’s disease.<sup>2,3</sup> Subjective cognitive decline, the self-reported experience of worsening or more frequent confusion or memory loss, is a form of cognitive impairment as well as one of the earliest symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias.<sup>4</sup> While older age and a family history of dementias can increase the risk for cognitive decline, 40% of dementia cases could be prevented or delayed by targeting 12 modifiable risk factors<sup>5</sup>, some of which are monitored by the VT Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).

## Subjective Cognitive Decline in Vermonters

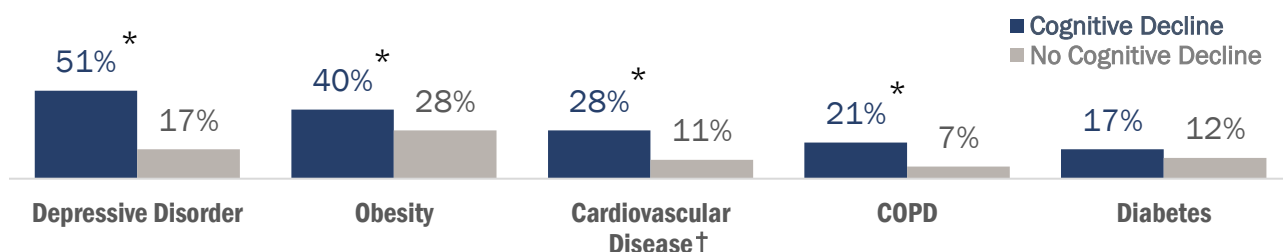
In 2016, one in ten (10%) Vermont adults 45 years and older reported they experienced worsening confusion or memory loss in the last year. This rate is six times higher among adults with a disability, compared to those with no disability (24% vs. 4%, respectively). Adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or other sexual identity (LGBT) have a significantly higher rate of cognitive decline (20%), compared to non-LGBT adults (9%). While the proportion of Black, Indigenous and people of color reporting cognitive decline is higher than that among white, non-Hispanic adults, the difference is not statistically significant. Cognitive decline is similar between males and females, as well as adults 45 to 64 years and those 65 and older. Of the adults who reported cognitive decline, almost half (46%) have themselves or through someone else discussed their confusion or memory loss with a health care professional.<sup>1</sup>

- In 2016, one in ten (10%) Vermonters 45 years and older reported experiencing worsening confusion or memory loss in the last year, similar to the 11% of U.S. adults.<sup>1</sup>
- Prevention and management of chronic disease and modifiable risk factors are recognized ways to reduce the risk of cognitive decline and dementias later in life.<sup>2</sup>

## Chronic Disease Prevention and Management

A number of chronic conditions are associated with a higher risk of developing dementias.<sup>2</sup> Rates of depressive disorder, obesity, cardiovascular disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are significantly higher among Vermont adults with cognitive decline, compared to those without cognitive decline. Adults with cognitive decline are more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes than those without cognitive decline, however this difference is not statistically significant. Poorly managed chronic conditions can lead to further cognitive impairment, adding to the impact of cognitive decline on a person’s ability to manage diseases.<sup>4</sup>

**Chronic Disease Among Vermonters 45 Years and Older by Cognitive Decline Status**



\*Statistical difference between those with cognitive decline and those without.

†Cardiovascular disease includes coronary heart disease, myocardial infarction (heart attack), or stroke.

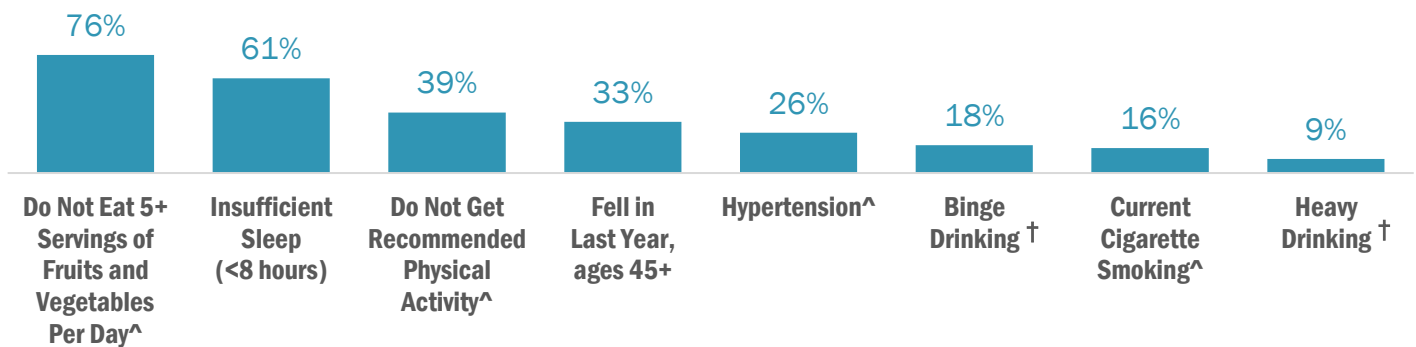
Source: Vermont Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2016

# Risk Factors for Subjective Cognitive Decline

## Modifiable Risk Behaviors

Multiple behaviors, including poor nutrition, insufficient sleep, lack of physical activity, falls, hypertension, excessive alcohol use and tobacco use, lead to increased risk for chronic disease, including dementias.<sup>2</sup> Three in four (76%) Vermont adults do not eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables per day<sup>6</sup> and 61% do not receive at least eight hours of sleep in a 24-hour period<sup>1</sup>. Thirty-nine percent of adults do not meet aerobic physical activity recommendations<sup>6</sup> and 33% of adults 45 and older have fell in the last year<sup>7</sup>. In the last month, 18% of adults report binge drinking while 16% percent of adults currently smoke cigarettes. Also in the last month, 9% of adults report drinking heavily.<sup>6</sup>

### Modifiable Risk Behaviors Among Vermont Adults



<sup>^</sup>Data are age-adjusted to the U.S. 2000 population.

<sup>†</sup>Binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks on an occasion for men and four or more for women.

Heavy drinking is defined as more than two drinks per day for men and more than one drink for women.

Source: Vermont Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2016 (sleep), 2018 (falls), 2019 (all other indicators)

## Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health, the conditions by which people are surrounded as well as the interrelated social structures that shape these conditions, are linked to a lack of opportunity and lack of resources to protect, improve and maintain health.<sup>8</sup> Vermont adults with less education and lower annual household incomes are more likely to report cognitive decline.<sup>1</sup> While social isolation is associated with a 50% increased risk of dementia,<sup>9</sup> 9% of Vermont adults rarely or never get the social and emotional support they need<sup>7</sup>. With the impact that built environments can have on health, community design can influence community health and individual behaviors.

### Key lifestyle changes that may reduce the risk of cognitive decline include:

- Preventing and managing obesity, diabetes, hearing loss, falls, concussions and depression
- Controlling blood pressure and maintaining good heart health
- Engaging in regular physical activity and adequate sleep
- Quitting smoking and limiting alcohol use
- Staying cognitively and socially engaged

For more information on brain health, visit: [www.healthvermont.gov/topic/brain-health](http://www.healthvermont.gov/topic/brain-health)

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<sup>1</sup>Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Alzheimer's Association, [2021 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures](#).

<sup>3</sup>Vermont Population Estimates, 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Subjective Cognitive Decline](#).

<sup>5</sup>Dementia prevention, intervention, and care: [2020 report of the Lancet Commission](#).

<sup>6</sup>Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2019.

<sup>7</sup>Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2018.

<sup>8</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [NCHHSTP Social Determinants of Health](#).

<sup>9</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions](#).