

**Reading and writing are good for your brain** by Vicki Martinka Petersen

You learn a lot of lessons in school when you're younger. Learning how to read and write at a young age could pay dividends toward good mental health in your later years.

People who never learned how to read or write could be three times as likely to develop dementia, according to new research published in the journal [Neurology](#). The study involved 983 adults with four or less years of schooling. The majority of study participants were born and raised in the Dominican Republic, where they had limited access to a formal education. Of the 237 adults who never learned how to read or write, 35% had dementia at the start of the study compared to 18% of literate adults who had dementia.

Participants had medical exams and underwent memory and thinking tests at the start of the study. Then every 18- to 24-months they did follow up testing where they recalled unrelated words and spoke as many words as they could think of in a category, such as fruit or items of clothing.

After adjusting the results for age, socioeconomic status and cardiovascular disease, researchers found people who were illiterate were three times greater having dementia at the start of the study.

"Of all the skills we learn at an early age, reading and writing are among our greatest tools we use throughout our lives to communicate our needs and our ideas with others," says [Dr. Darren Gitelman](#), a neurologist at [Advocate Lutheran General Hospital](#) in Park Ridge, IL.

Parents and grandparents can help model literacy for the youngsters in their lives by promoting family outings to the local library or bookstore, spending quiet time as a family reading or even chatting around the dinner table what book everyone is reading.

"If we wait to read once the kids go to bed, they might get the impression that reading is only something you do for school. Instead, we can encourage them to develop life-long reading and writing skills by sharing our own experiences," Dr. Gitelman says.

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Wishing you joy and good health,  
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