

When Mackay residents Paul and Narell Schmidtko were looking to retire, they made a deliberate decision to maintain their busy schedules and activities.

The couple realised embracing their early retirement years would be crucial to their wellbeing.

Last year, they left the family home for Carlyle Gardens Mackay, a choice that resulted in reduced home maintenance and left them more time to take on activities that stimulate them and they enjoy.

"We hit the ground running when we came into the village," Mrs Schmidtko said.

"We decided that when we finished our paid working days, we still had it in us and would love to keep on going."

"We decided we were not always going to be as fit and well as we are now, that's just a natural progression of life. Healthy ageing is being active, getting involved, having your mind stimulated."

The Schmidtkos aren't the only ones focusing on older middle age.

Researchers have been looking at the importance of this life stage, and have found staying active, remaining engaged in the community and sleeping enough during retirement are emerging as critical factors to maintaining health and wellbeing in later life - especially for brain health.

Released from the day-to-day grind of work and young family responsibilities, early retirement years are increasingly acknowledged as an important period when physical health, diet, mental activity and social engagement can impact future dementia risk.

Professor Sharon Naismith, director of the Healthy Brain Ageing Program at the University of Sydney, said while people were physically healthier in older age



CONNECTED: Researchers found staying active and engaged in the community during retirement are critical factors to maintaining health and wellbeing in later life. Inset below: Paul and Narell Schmidtko.

reduce their risk through early intervention strategies.

"These retirement years are critical because we know dementia starts to build up about 20 years before anyone actually gets a diagnosis," she said.

Factors known to increase dementia risk include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, inadequate sleep, insufficient cognitive activity, hearing loss, too much alcohol and even air pollution.



Prof Naismith said maintaining an active lifestyle was important for reducing dementia and Alzheimer's disease risk. She pointed to high blood pressure, which some studies suggested could contribute eight per cent to dementia risk. Another key area was social engagement and reducing the risk of depression, which increases the levels of stress hormones in the brain.

"As people retire and if they're not remaining socially

connected and lose their purpose, then depression can set in," she said. "That's a big one."

Having wrapped up her paid work in administration, Mrs Schmidtko, now 66, scores for the local ladies' basketball league and participates in their fundraisers. She spends time working with the village social club to organise regular events. She also researches local women pioneers and is a member of the Mackay Family History Society.

Mr Schmidtko, 69, also sought to stay engaged and busy after retiring from his busy weeks managing operations at the Mackay port.

"I just didn't want to go from 50-hour weeks to nothing," he said.

He volunteers at the Mackay Base Hospital information desk twice weekly and is undertaking training to be a PCYC driving mentor to help people gain their licence on-the-road hours. He is also working with his wife and helps with village social activities, often manning the bar or turning the sausages. They've both done online training for different courses to keep up with technology and learn new skills. While that work exercises their brain, they also look after their bodies, walking 6000 steps each morning around the lake.

Mrs Schmidtko explained their choice to move to Carlyle Gardens Mackay has helped them take on so many activities and really enjoy each day.

"This is a wonderful lifestyle if you want to get involved," she said. "There is the pool, there is choir, the gym. It is enriching our life."

Carlyle Gardens Mackay offers independent over-60s affordable resort-style living. Find out more at the website.

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