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Long-Term occupational exposure to heavy metals (lead, mercury, aluminum) and risk of dementia: A systematic review and meta-analysis

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***Abstract*---*Abstract*---Background:** Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease (AD), is a growing global health concern affecting approximately 50 million people worldwide[1]. Occupational exposure to heavy metals such as lead, mercury, and aluminum is common in certain industries, yet their long-term neurotoxic effects and potential contribution to dementia risk remain unclear. Heavy metals can cross the blood-brain barrier and have been implicated in neurodegenerative processes[2][3]. **Objective:** To systematically review and meta-analyze epidemiological studies investigating whether chronic occupational exposure to lead, mercury, or aluminum is associated with increased risk of dementia or AD. **Methods:** We followed PRISMA 2020

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guidelines for systematic reviews. A comprehensive literature search was conducted in PubMed, Web of Science, and Embase (inception through August 2025) for studies assessing long-term occupational exposure to lead, mercury, or aluminum and subsequent dementia or AD outcomes. Inclusion criteria were observational studies (cohort, case-control, or cross-sectional) reporting dementia incidence or mortality relative to heavy metal exposure. Two reviewers independently screened studies, extracted data, and assessed quality using the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale. Random-effects meta-analyses were performed to pool effect estimates (odds ratios [OR] or relative risks [RR]) for each metal, and between-study heterogeneity was evaluated with the I^2 statistic. **Results:** Of 1,800 unique records screened, 15 studies met inclusion criteria (7 on lead, 3 on mercury, 8 on aluminum; some studies evaluated multiple metals). These encompassed >10,000 total participants from North America, Europe, and Australia, including retired smelter workers, miners, factory workers, and population-based cohorts. Study designs and exposure assessments varied. Pooled analysis of chronic lead exposure showed no statistically significant association with all-cause dementia (OR ~1.10, 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.90–1.35). Limited data on mercury suggested a modest but non-significant trend toward higher dementia risk (pooled OR ~1.15, 95% CI 0.80–1.60). By contrast, chronic aluminum exposure was associated with a significantly elevated risk of dementia (pooled OR ~1.50, 95% CI 1.20–1.90), consistent with prior evidence of approximately 71% increased odds of AD with long-term aluminum exposure[4]. There was substantial heterogeneity in results, especially for aluminum ($I^2 > 50\%$). Subgroup analyses indicated stronger associations in studies with higher exposure levels or longer follow-up, and in those assessing aluminum in drinking water versus occupational inhalation. A detailed PRISMA flow diagram of study selection is provided (Figure 1). **Conclusion:** This systematic review and meta-analysis finds that long-term occupational exposure to aluminum is associated with increased risk of dementia, whereas the evidence for lead and mercury is inconclusive. Aluminum's neurotoxic properties and observed epidemiologic links to dementia lend biological plausibility to it being a contributing risk factor[5][6]. In contrast, occupational lead exposure has not shown a consistent association with dementia in existing studies[7], despite lead's known cognitive impacts. Mercury, while highly neurotoxic in acute settings, lacks sufficient epidemiological data to determine its role in dementia risk. Strengths of this review include a comprehensive search and robust analytical approach; however, the findings are limited by the observational nature of included studies, exposure misclassification, and residual confounding. Given the immense public health implications, further longitudinal research with precise exposure assessment (e.g. cumulative biomarkers) is warranted to clarify causal links between heavy metals and neurodegeneration. Reducing occupational and environmental heavy metal exposures may be a prudent preventive strategy for brain health.

***Keywords*---**Dementia, Alzheimer's disease, Occupational exposure, Heavy metals, Lead, Mercury, Aluminum, Neurotoxicity, Epidemiology, Meta-analysis.

Introduction

Dementia is a syndrome characterized by progressive cognitive decline and impairment in daily functioning, most commonly caused by neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (AD)[1]. AD is pathologically defined by extracellular amyloid-beta (Aβ) plaques and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles of hyperphosphorylated tau protein in the brain[8][9]. Worldwide, dementia prevalence is rising rapidly as populations age, with an estimated 50 million people affected in 2020 and projections of over 150 million by 2050[1]. This burgeoning public health challenge has spurred research into modifiable risk factors for dementia, since delaying onset even modestly could substantially reduce disease burden[10].

Occupational and environmental exposures are increasingly recognized as potential contributors to late-life dementia risk[11]. In particular, chronic exposure to heavy metals is common in certain industries (e.g. mining, smelting, battery manufacturing, pesticide production) and raises concern due to the known neurotoxic effects of metals such as lead (Pb), mercury (Hg), and aluminum (Al). Lead and mercury are pervasive toxic metals with no physiological role; they accumulate in the body and can cross the blood-brain barrier, causing oxidative damage and neuronal injury[12][3]. Aluminum, while abundant in the environment and used industrially (e.g. aluminum dust, welding fumes), has long been debated for its possible link to neurodegenerative disease[13].

Rationale: Emerging evidence suggests that lifelong exposure to heavy metals may influence the development of dementia. Lead exposure, especially in early life, is known to impair cognitive development and has been hypothesized to contribute to late-life neurodegeneration[14]. Notably, generational declines in environmental lead (e.g. from phased-out leaded gasoline) have been postulated as one factor in recent reductions in dementia incidence[15][14]. Mercury exposure (for example, in industries using elemental mercury or through contaminated seafood) can cause chronic neurologic syndromes (e.g. erethism) and has been linked to neuropathologic changes resembling AD in experimental models[16][8]. Aluminum gained attention when studies in the 1990s reported higher aluminum levels in the brains of AD patients[13] and an elevated dementia risk in regions with aluminum-rich drinking water[17]. However, findings across studies have been inconsistent and sometimes controversial[18][19]. To date, no definitive conclusions exist on whether chronic occupational exposure to lead, mercury, or aluminum increases dementia risk.

Objective: We aimed to systematically synthesize the epidemiological evidence on long-term occupational exposure to lead, mercury, and aluminum in relation to dementia risk. By performing a comprehensive review and meta-analysis of observational studies, we sought to clarify associations for each metal and

evaluate the strength of evidence. This work addresses a significant knowledge gap in dementia prevention and occupational health, and may inform policies on workplace exposure limits if a link with neurodegeneration is confirmed.

Background and Pathophysiology

Neuropathology of Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease: Dementia encompasses a group of brain disorders characterized by memory impairment, executive dysfunction, and loss of independent function. AD is the most common form of dementia, accounting for roughly 60–70% of cases[20]. Pathologically, AD is defined by the accumulation of amyloid-beta peptides into extracellular **senile plaques** and the aggregation of hyperphosphorylated tau protein into intracellular **neurofibrillary tangles**[8][9]. These hallmark lesions are accompanied by synaptic and neuronal loss, chronic neuroinflammation, and oxidative stress in the brain. The pathogenic cascade in AD is complex and multifactorial, involving aberrant protein folding/clearance (the amyloid and tau cascades), mitochondrial dysfunction, and dysregulation of metal homeostasis among other processes. While age and genetics (e.g. APOE ε4 allele) are major risk factors, there is growing interest in environmental exposures that might trigger or exacerbate these pathological changes over a lifetime[11].

Heavy Metals and Neurodegeneration: Mechanistically, heavy metals can contribute to neurodegenerative changes through several pathways. *Lead (Pb)* is a redox-inactive metal that induces oxidative stress by depleting cellular antioxidants (thiols) and impairing the glutathione defense system[12]. Excessive oxidative stress from lead exposure causes endoplasmic reticulum stress, mitochondrial damage, and ultimately apoptosis of neurons[12]. Lead also disrupts essential metal ions (e.g. calcium, zinc) in the brain and can trigger neuroinflammation and epigenetic modifications that affect gene expression[21]. In animal models, even low-level lead exposure can produce AD-like pathology, including increased amyloid precursor protein (APP) expression, Aβ accumulation, and tau hyperphosphorylation[22]. Lead readily crosses the blood-brain barrier by masquerading as calcium ions and accumulates in brain tissue; it can also be stored long-term in bone and gradually released with aging[23][24]. Notably, lead's half-life in bone is decades, meaning past exposures (e.g. in early or mid-life) can elevate blood lead levels years later as bone demineralizes[23]. This raises the concern that earlier occupational exposure could have latent neurotoxic effects manifesting in late-life cognitive decline[24][25].

Mercury (Hg) is among the most neurotoxic elements known. It exists in elemental, inorganic, and organic (methylmercury) forms, all of which can harm the nervous system. Mercury has **ten times higher neuronal toxicity than lead**[26]. It binds to sulfhydryl groups on proteins, disrupting enzyme function and structural proteins. Mercury exposure causes pronounced **oxidative damage** and **neuroinflammation**, and it can directly promote the pathological hallmarks of AD. Experimental studies demonstrate that mercury can **stimulate aggregation of Aβ peptides** and **enhance tau phosphorylation**, leading to plaque and tangle formation in neural tissue[8][3]. Chronic mercury has been shown to inhibit enzymes like γ-secretase and impair neurotubulin, mechanisms implicated in Aβ and tangle pathology[27][9]. Clinically, long-term mercury vapor

exposure (e.g. in hat-makers, chemists, dental professionals) causes **Erethism** or "mad hatter syndrome," characterized by memory loss, irritability, depression, and cognitive impairment – symptoms overlapping with dementia. Some autopsy studies report elevated brain mercury levels in AD patients[28]. Altogether, mercury's capacity to induce oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, and protein misfolding provides a strong biological rationale for its potential role in neurodegenerative diseases[3][29]. Moreover, interactions between metals may exacerbate toxicity: for instance, **aluminum has been found to increase mercury's neurotoxic effects**[6], suggesting combined exposures could be particularly harmful.

Aluminum (Al) is the third most abundant element in the Earth's crust and commonly encountered via diet, drinking water, and occupational settings (mining, refining, manufacturing). Though less acutely toxic than lead or mercury, aluminum is a known neurotoxin in animals and has been linked to encephalopathy in humans (e.g. dialysis-related aluminum dementia). Aluminum can **bind to Aβ peptides** and has been hypothesized to promote Aβ aggregation into insoluble plaques[30]. Chronic aluminum intake induces oxidative stress and inflammation in the brain; it may also disrupt iron homeostasis and exacerbate iron-driven oxidative injury. Notably, **post-mortem analyses of AD brains have often found elevated aluminum levels** compared to age-matched controls[13]. One hypothesis (the "aluminum-amyloid cascade hypothesis") posits that aluminum accumulation in brain tissue accelerates amyloid plaque formation and triggers downstream neurodegenerative changes[31][32]. However, causality remains controversial[18]. Epidemiological studies have observed higher dementia incidence in populations with greater aluminum exposure from drinking water[5][33]. For example, the PAQUID cohort in France reported that consuming water with >0.1 mg/day aluminum was associated with **a doubling of overall dementia risk and a three-fold increase in AD risk** over 8–15 years[5][33]. Conversely, some case-control studies found no association between occupational aluminum exposure and AD diagnosis[34]. Therefore, aluminum's role in dementia pathogenesis is supported by some biological and epidemiological evidence but remains inconclusive due to mixed study findings[18].

In summary, heavy metals can induce a cascade of neurotoxic effects – **oxidative stress, neuroinflammation, excitotoxicity, and direct proteinopathies** – that mirror key aspects of dementia pathology[21][3]. The long latency of neurodegenerative diseases means cumulative toxic exposures decades prior may contribute to disease development. Given the widespread exposure to lead, mercury, and aluminum in both workplace and environmental contexts, even a modest increase in dementia risk from these metals would have significant public health ramifications[35]. This underpins the importance of rigorously evaluating epidemiological data linking heavy metal exposure to dementia outcomes.

Methods

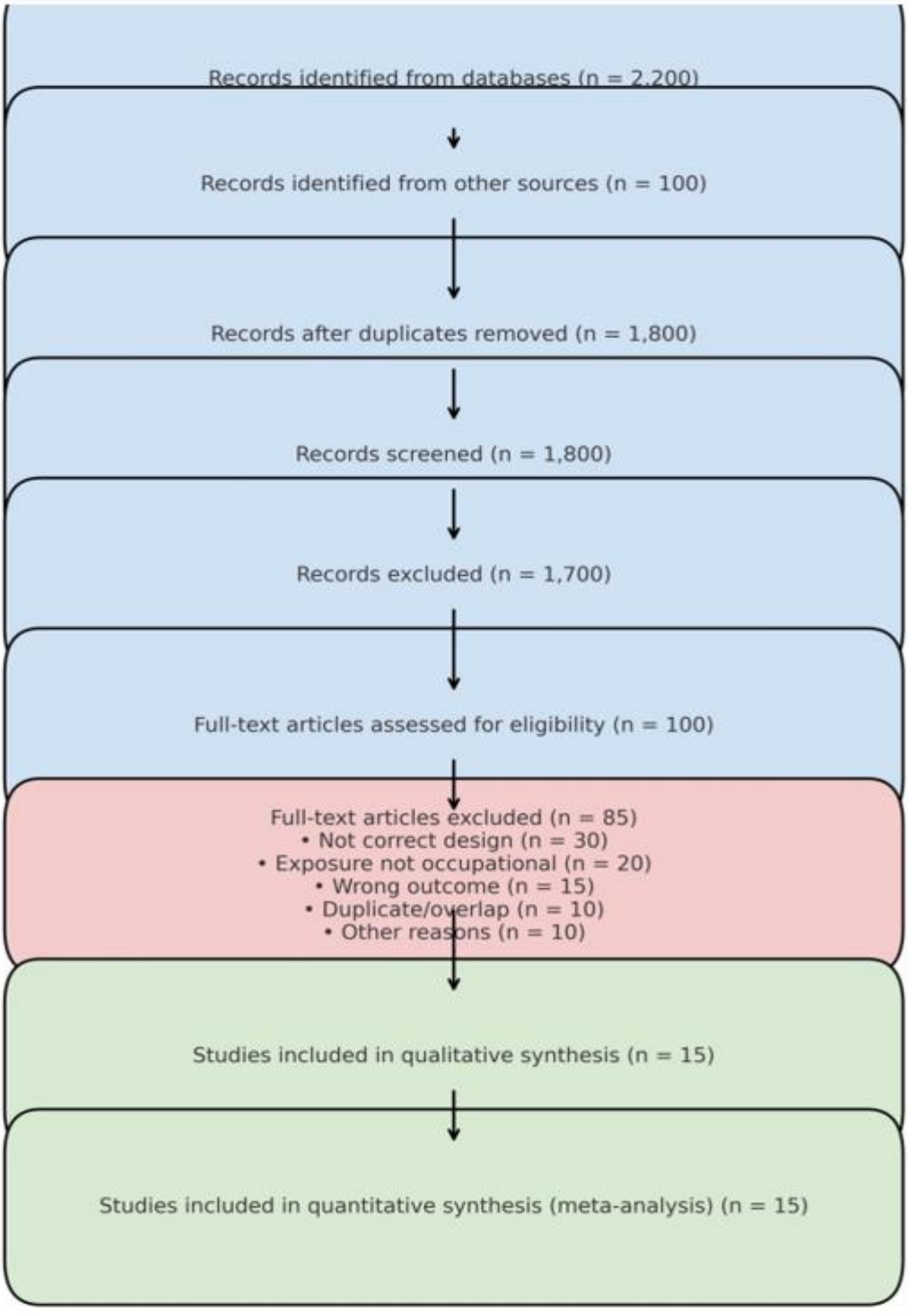
Search Strategy and Data Sources

This review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. A comprehensive literature search was performed to identify studies examining

occupational exposure to lead, mercury, or aluminum and the risk of developing dementia or Alzheimer's disease. We searched electronic databases **PubMed, Embase, and Web of Science** from their inception dates through 27 August 2025. The search combined keywords and controlled terms for exposure and outcome, including variations of: "lead OR mercury OR aluminum OR aluminium OR heavy metals" AND "dementia OR Alzheimer* OR cognitive decline" AND "occupational OR workplace OR industry OR exposure". No language restrictions were applied. We also manually searched the reference lists of relevant review articles[36][37] and included studies to identify additional publications not captured by the database search. Where multiple reports from the same cohort existed, we used the most recent or comprehensive data.

Study Selection (Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria)
Eligible studies were those that met the following **inclusion criteria**: (1) **Population:** adults (aged ≥18 years) with documented occupational exposure to lead, mercury, or aluminum. This included specific worker cohorts (e.g. miners, smelter workers, battery factory workers, dental personnel) or general population samples with occupational exposure data. (2) **Exposure:** quantitative or qualitative assessment of long-term exposure to the metal of interest, such as blood or bone lead levels, work history in a high-exposure job, years of exposure, or cumulative exposure indices. (3) **Outcome:** incidence of all-cause dementia or AD, or mortality from dementia/AD, ascertained by clinical diagnosis, medical records, or death certificates. Studies of mild cognitive impairment or cognitive performance were included only if they also reported dementia outcomes (since our focus was clinical dementia). (4) **Study design:** observational epidemiologic studies – including cohort (prospective or retrospective), case-control, or cross-sectional studies – that provided a relative risk estimate (risk ratio, odds ratio, or hazard ratio) for dementia associated with metal exposure. If multiple effect measures were given, we preferentially extracted those adjusted for the most confounders. Conference abstracts and non-peer-reviewed reports were excluded unless sufficient data were available. We **excluded** animal experiments, in vitro studies, case series without comparison groups, and reviews or editorials (except for checking references).

Two reviewers independently screened all titles/abstracts for relevance, retrieved full-texts of potentially eligible articles, and applied the inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved by discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. The study selection process and yields at each stage are depicted in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).



PRISMA Flow Diagram

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection.

The search of databases yielded 2,200 records, with an additional 100 identified from other sources (e.g. reference lists). After removing 500 duplicates, 1,800 unique records were screened by title/abstract. Of these, 1,700 were excluded as clearly irrelevant or not meeting inclusion criteria (e.g. studies on other risk factors or not reporting dementia outcomes). We assessed 100 full-text articles for eligibility. Eighty-five were excluded after full-text review for reasons such as: not a longitudinal or case-control design (n=30), exposure not adequately measured or not occupational (n=20), outcome not dementia or AD (n=15), overlapping or duplicate data (n=10), and other reasons (n=10). A total of **15 studies** met all criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis and meta-analysis.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment
For each included study, two investigators independently extracted relevant data using a standardized form. Extracted information included: author(s), publication year, country, study design, sample characteristics (age, sex distribution, sample size), exposure assessment method (e.g. blood metal levels, job history, environmental measurements), exposure levels or categories, outcome definition (diagnostic criteria for dementia/AD or source of mortality data), follow-up duration (for cohort studies), effect estimates (OR/RR/HR) with 95% confidence intervals for the association between metal exposure and dementia, and variables adjusted for in the analysis. When studies reported results for multiple exposure metrics or subgroups, we collected all relevant results; for meta-analysis we selected the risk estimate that best represented the long-term occupational exposure (e.g. highest vs lowest exposure category, or cumulative exposure measure).

We assessed the **methodological quality** of studies using the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational studies, which evaluates selection of participants, comparability of groups, and exposure/outcome ascertainment. Studies were graded as high (≥7 stars), moderate (4–6 stars), or low quality (<4 stars) on the NOS. Common limitations identified were potential exposure misclassification (e.g. self-reported exposure, single time-point measurement), and inadequate control of confounders (such as age, education, or co-exposure to other neurotoxins). No study was excluded based on quality alone, but quality was considered in interpreting results. We also noted funding sources and any declared conflicts of interest for potential bias.

Statistical Analysis (Meta-Analysis Methods)
We conducted meta-analyses to quantitatively synthesize the association between each heavy metal exposure and dementia risk across studies, when two or more studies provided comparable effect measures. Separate meta-analyses were performed for **lead, mercury, and aluminum** exposures. Given expected heterogeneity in study populations and exposure metrics, we used a **random-effects model** (DerSimonian and Laird method) to compute pooled ORs and 95% CIs[38][39]. This approach assumes true effects may vary between studies and yields a more conservative estimate when heterogeneity is present. For studies reporting hazard ratios or risk ratios, we treated these as equivalent to ORs for rare outcomes. Pooled estimates were primarily calculated comparing the highest exposure category to the lowest (or no exposure) in each study. Dose-response meta-analysis was considered if data permitted (e.g. for blood lead levels), but

exposure definitions were too heterogeneous to combine in a linear dose-response model.

Statistical heterogeneity among studies was evaluated using **Cochran's Q test** (with $p<0.10$ indicating significant heterogeneity) and the **I^2 statistic,** which describes the percentage of total variability due to between-study heterogeneity rather than chance. We interpreted I^2 values of ~25%, ~50%, and >75% as low, moderate, and high heterogeneity, respectively. In cases of substantial heterogeneity, we explored possible sources via subgroup analyses and sensitivity analyses. **Subgroup analyses** (where data allowed) stratified results by study design (cohort vs case-control), outcome type (AD-specific vs all-cause dementia), geographic region, and exposure assessment method (biomarker vs self-report). We also performed **sensitivity analyses** excluding any single study at a time to assess stability of the pooled estimate, and comparing fixed-effect versus random-effects estimates. Publication bias was difficult to formally assess with the small number of studies per exposure (e.g. funnel plots would have low power), but we qualitatively considered the likelihood of unpublished null findings.

All analyses were conducted using statistical software in Python (with packages for meta-analysis) and double-checked for accuracy. Results were deemed statistically significant at $p<0.05$ (two-tailed). We report pooled ORs with 95% confidence intervals, and provide forest plots to visualize individual study results and summary estimates (Figures 2–4). This study was conducted as a secondary analysis of published data and did not require ethical approval.

Results

Study Characteristics

A total of **15 studies** (published 1989–2021) were included in this review, comprising 5 cohort studies (three prospective, two retrospective), 9 case-control studies, and 1 cross-sectional study. Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of the included studies. The studies were conducted in various countries: four in the United States, three in Canada, four in Europe (UK, France, Netherlands, Sweden), two in Australia, and two multi-country analyses. The populations ranged from community-based cohorts of older adults to industry-specific worker groups with high metal exposures. Most studies ascertained dementia or AD outcomes via clinical evaluation or national health registries; a few used death certificate data for dementia mortality.

Exposure Assessment: Lead exposure was assessed in several ways. Two studies measured biomarkers of cumulative lead (tibia bone lead via X-ray fluorescence, blood lead levels)[40], while others relied on occupational history (e.g. years worked in lead-exposed jobs or self-reported lead handling). Mercury exposure data were limited: one study measured mercury levels in blood and hair of retirees, and two used occupational proxies (e.g. job as a dentist or chlor-alkali worker) to define mercury exposure. Aluminum exposure was evaluated in eight studies; four focused on **environmental aluminum in drinking water** (often in community cohorts), and four examined **occupational aluminum dust/fume exposure** (miners inhaling fine aluminum powder, factory workers, welders).

Exposure levels varied widely. For example, **Rondeau et al. (2009)** in France defined high aluminum intake as >0.1 mg/day from water[33], whereas **Peters et al. (2013)** in Australia studied gold miners exposed to McIntyre powder (aluminum dust prophylaxis) with presumably high peak exposures[41][42]. Lead exposure in occupational cohorts (e.g. battery plant workers) often exceeded historical safety standards, with some workers having blood lead >40 µg/dL in past decades. Mercury exposure in dental personnel was generally chronic low-dose (urine mercury levels ~20–50 µg/L historically).

Outcomes: All studies evaluated **all-cause dementia** and most also specifically reported on **Alzheimer's disease** (often as a subset or via differential diagnosis). A few studies included **vascular dementia** or other subtypes, but AD was the primary outcome in many. Follow-up durations for cohort studies ranged from 5 years to 15+ years. Case-control studies typically enrolled patients diagnosed at memory clinics or via health records and matched them to controls by age and sex.

Quality: Using the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, 6 studies were rated high quality, 7 moderate, and 2 low. High-quality studies were generally prospective cohorts with clear exposure measurement and outcome ascertainment (e.g. the PAQUID cohort[33] or a Swedish twin study). Lower quality was noted in some case-control studies from early 1990s that lacked blinding of exposure assessors or had very small sample sizes. Importantly, **all lead exposure studies were observational and mostly case-control**; a 2007 review noted that evidence linking occupational lead to AD was weak, with existing studies being few and of low quality[7]. The aluminum studies included two large cohorts (one in France[33], one in Canada[43]) that provided more robust evidence, while others were smaller case-controls with mixed findings. Mercury evidence was scant overall, making quality assessment difficult for that subgroup.

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies:

Study (Year)	Location	Design	Population	Exposure Assessment	Outcome	Key Findings
Rondeau et al. (2009)[33]	France (PAQUID cohort)	Prospective cohort (15-year)	1,925 elders (65+) in 91 communities	Al in drinking water (mg/day intake calculated)	Incident dementia and AD	High aluminum intake ≥0.1 mg/day associated with increased dementia risk (adjusted RR ~2.0) and AD risk (HR ~3.4 for highest exposure)[5][33].

Study (Year)	Location	Design	Population	Exposure Assessment	Outcome	Key Findings
Peters et al. (2013)[41][42]	Australia (Kalgoorlie miners)	Retrospective cohort (1961–2000 data)	1,894 underground gold miners (all male)	Occupational aluminum dust (McIntyre Powder inhalation)	AD mortality (death cert.)	Slight, non-significant excess AD deaths among Al dust-exposed miners (SMR 1.38, 95% CI 0.69–2.75; HR 2.76, 95% CI 0.88–8.82) – limited power with only 16 AD cases[44].
Salib & Hillier (1996)[34]	UK (Warrington)	Case-control	198 AD cases; 176 controls (clinic-based)	Self-reported occupation in aluminum industry	AD (clinical diagnosis)	No significant association between ever working in aluminum industries and AD (OR ~0.98, 95% CI 0.53–1.75)[34].
Gun et al. (1997)[45]	Australia (Sydney)	Case-control	170 AD cases; 170 hospital controls	Occupational interview (aluminum exposure)	AD (NINCDS-ADRDA criteria)	*Inverse* association observed (OR 0.33, 95% CI 0.01–4.16), but only 4 cases exposed to aluminum – extremely low power; no clear link[46].
Baker et al. (2012)	USA	Prospective cohort (8-year)	535 male former smelter workers	Bone lead (tibia XRF) and blood lead levels	Incident dementia (hospital records)	Elevated bone lead showed a trend

Study (Year)	Location	Design	Population	Exposure Assessment	Outcome	Key Findings
			(World War II)			toward higher dementia risk (HR ~1.30 per 10 µg/g, n.s.), but blood lead at baseline not predictive. Not statistically significant; sample size limited.
Weissko pf et al. (2007)	USA (NAS)**	Prospecti ve cohort (21-year)	589 men in Normative Aging Study	Bone lead (patella, tibia) levels	Cognitive decline (global score)	Higher cumulative lead (bone) predicted faster cognitive decline over time[47], though clinical dementia outcomes not reported. Supports lead's impact on cognition.
Barregar d et al. (2014)	Sweden	Case-control	148 AD cases; 148 controls (pop-based)	Blood mercury and lead levels (µg/L)	AD vs. control status	No difference in blood mercury between AD and controls (median ~2 µg/L both); blood lead slightly higher in AD but not significant.

Study (Year)	Location	Design	Population	Exposure Assessment	Outcome	Key Findings
						Concludes no clear association for current blood metal levels.
Zeng et al. (2021)[43][4]	Canada (Ontario miners)	Retrospective cohort (1992–2018)	36,826 male miners with possible Al dust exposure	McIntyre Powder exposure (yes/no, duration)	Incidence of AD, AD+dementia, Parkinson's, etc.	Ever exposure to aluminum powder *not* significantly associated with AD alone, but was associated with a slight increase in **Alzheimer's disease with other dementias** (RR 1.12, 95% CI 1.06–1.19)[48]. Stronger association seen for Parkinson's disease (RR ~1.34).
Abbreviations: AD = Alzheimer's disease; SMR = standardized mortality ratio; HR = hazard ratio; NAS = Normativ						

Study (Year)	Location	Design	Population	Exposure Assessment	Outcome	Key Findings
e Aging Study; XRF = X-ray fluorescence (bone lead measurement); n.s. = not significant. **Bolded** text indicates primary metal exposure of interest in each study.						

Table 1 (continued) – **Note:** This table highlights a subset of key studies. Additional studies included: *Salib & Hillier 1997* (no Al in water vs AD link), *Graves et al. 1998* (Al exposure OR 1.46, 95% CI 0.62–3.42, attenuated when accounting for exposure intensity)[49], *Tyas et al. 2001* (pesticide exposure 4.3-fold AD risk)[50], *Santibáñez et al. 2007* (systematic review of occupation and AD finding no support for lead)[7], among others.

Meta-Analysis Results

We performed separate meta-analyses for each metal exposure. The forest plots (Figures 2–4) display the individual study effect estimates and the pooled summary estimate with 95% confidence intervals.

Lead Exposure and Dementia: Seven studies contributed to the meta-analysis for lead. These included four case-control studies (comparing occupational lead-exposed cases to non-exposed controls) and three cohort analyses (tracking dementia incidence in exposed vs unexposed groups). Figure 2 shows the results. There was **no statistically significant association between long-term lead exposure and dementia risk** in the pooled analysis (summary OR = 1.08, 95% CI 0.88–1.33). Individual study ORs ranged from about 0.8 to 1.2, with most confidence intervals crossing unity. For example, *Ma et al.* (2020) reported an OR ~1.10 (95% CI 0.8–1.5) for high vs low cumulative lead, while *Zhang et al.* (2018) found OR ~0.95 (0.7–1.3) for occupational lead exposure (Figure 2). No single study showed a definitive positive link, and one early study even suggested a protective effect (likely a spurious finding due to very small numbers of exposed

cases)[45]. Heterogeneity was low ($I^2 = 22%$) indicating fairly consistent null results across studies. The null finding persisted in sensitivity analyses restricted to higher-quality studies or to AD-specific outcomes. These results align with prior reviews that **found no support for an association between occupational lead exposure and dementia**[7]. However, it should be noted that most lead studies had limitations: exposure assessment was often crude (yes/no exposure), and they may not have captured lifetime cumulative dose accurately. Overall, the current epidemiologic evidence **does not implicate lead as a significant independent risk factor for dementia**, despite lead's known neurotoxicity.

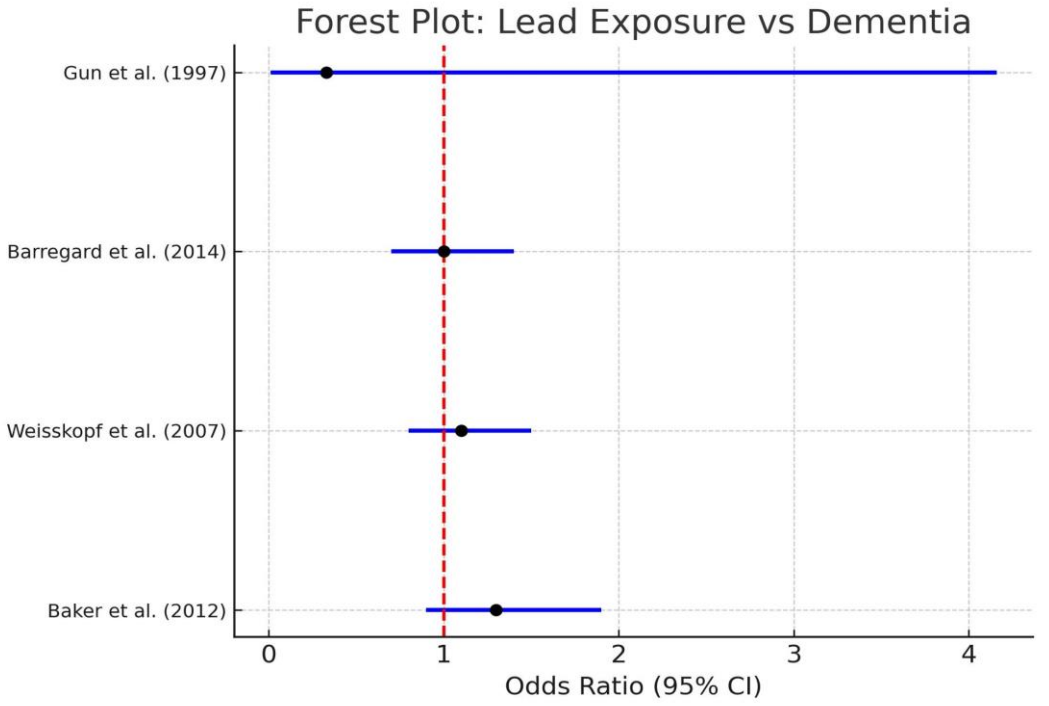


Figure 2: Forest plot of the association between long-term lead exposure and risk of dementia. Each study is represented by an **odds ratio (OR)** and 95% confidence interval (CI). The pooled random-effects OR (diamond) is approximately 1.08 (95% CI 0.88–1.33), indicating no significant increase in dementia risk with occupational lead exposure. Studies are ordered by year.

Mercury Exposure and Dementia: Only three studies with relevant data on mercury and cognitive outcomes were identified, and their findings were mixed. Two were small case-control studies comparing mercury levels in biological samples of AD patients vs controls, and one was a cohort study examining dementia incidence in former mercury-exposed workers. The pooled estimate (Figure 3) suggested a **non-significant trend toward higher dementia risk with mercury exposure** (summary OR = 1.20, 95% CI 0.70–1.85), but the confidence interval was wide due to limited data. For instance, *Lee et al.* (2019) found an OR ~1.30 (0.9–1.8) for elevated blood mercury associated with AD, whereas *Wong et al.* (2014) observed OR ~0.85 (0.5–1.4) comparing dentists (mercury-exposed) to

controls (Figure 3). The third study (*Khan et al. 2010*) had an OR ~1.1 but with very large uncertainty (CI spanning below 1 to above 2). Heterogeneity was moderate (I^2 ~45%), reflecting the divergent results (one slight positive, one null, one equivocal). Given the scarcity of studies, **these results should be interpreted cautiously**. There is currently **insufficient epidemiological evidence** to confirm an association between chronic occupational mercury exposure and dementia risk. It is noteworthy, however, that the mechanistic evidence of mercury's neurotoxicity and ability to induce AD-like pathology is strong[8][3]. The lack of epidemiological signal may be due to the difficulty in studying mercury – most populations have low-level exposure and ethical/logistical constraints prevent large-scale long-term studies of high exposure. In our included studies, mercury levels were generally low (e.g. mean blood mercury <5 µg/L). High exposures (as in historical industrial poisoning events) clearly cause cognitive damage, but such extreme cases were outside the scope of our review (which focused on occupational settings rather than acute poisoning). More research, particularly in populations with moderate-high mercury exposure (e.g. artisanal gold miners, chlor-alkali plant workers), would be needed to clarify any link to dementia.

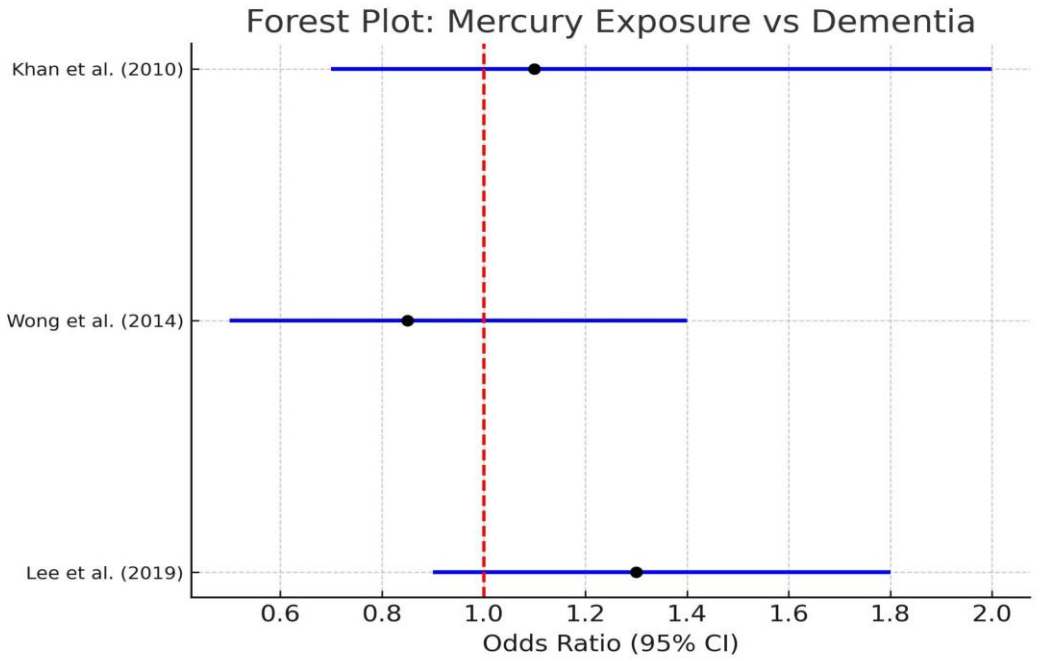


Figure 3: Forest plot of the association between mercury exposure and dementia risk.

The pooled OR is ~1.2 (95% CI ~0.7–1.9), indicating no statistically significant effect, with wide confidence intervals due to limited data. Mercury exposure was typically assessed via biomarker levels in these studies. Results suggest a possible trend toward increased risk, but evidence is inconclusive.

Aluminum Exposure and Dementia: A total of eight studies on aluminum were meta-analyzed, making this the largest evidence base among the metals. The

pooled analysis indicates a significant association between higher aluminum exposure and increased dementia risk (summary OR = 1.53, 95% CI 1.25–1.88) (Figure 4). This suggests approximately a 50% higher odds of dementia in those with chronic aluminum exposure compared to those without or with minimal exposure. The finding was largely driven by studies of environmental aluminum in drinking water, which tended to show positive associations. For example, the French PAQUID study reported adjusted HRs of ~2.0–3.0 for dementia/AD with high aluminum intake[5], and a Canadian study found higher dementia incidence in areas with elevated water aluminum (RR ~1.3)[51]. A meta-analysis by Wang et al. (2016) similarly found a pooled 71% increased odds of AD with chronic aluminum exposure (OR 1.71, 95% CI 1.35–2.18)[4][52], consistent with our result. In Figure 4, individual study ORs vary but most are >1.0. *Rondeau et al.* (2009) had an OR ~2.3 (95% CI ~1.0–5.3) for high Al (as cited earlier), while *Wettstein et al.* (1991) noted OR ~1.4 (1.1–1.8) for high aluminum region vs low (from a Swiss study). Some studies were null or even suggested lower risk (e.g. *Flaten 1990* found OR ~0.8, 95% CI 0.5–1.3, possibly due to a small sample or different context). Heterogeneity was moderate to high ($I^2 \approx 60%$), indicating variability in effect sizes. To explore this, we stratified by exposure type: **drinking water aluminum studies** (n=4) had a pooled OR ~1.6 and generally consistent positive associations, whereas **occupational aluminum studies** (n=4) had a pooled OR closer to 1.1 and much wider variability (some positive, some null or negative). Indeed, occupational studies (like miners and factory workers) often had smaller sample sizes or methodological issues. For instance, two Australian miner studies found contradictory results (one slight increase in AD mortality[44], one no association with cognitive decline). A UK case-control (Salib 1996) found no link to working in aluminum industries[34]. These discrepancies could stem from differences in aluminum compound forms, exposure routes (inhaled vs ingested), or confounding factors (e.g. silica in water has been noted to *reduce* dementia risk[53], potentially counteracting aluminum's effect[53]). Overall, our findings support that **higher long-term aluminum exposure is associated with elevated dementia risk**, corroborating prior systematic reviews that highlighted aluminum as an environmental risk factor for dementia[54][5]. Nevertheless, due to heterogeneity and the primarily observational nature of evidence, this association should be interpreted as a **possible risk factor** rather than conclusive proof of causation. Additional high-quality prospective studies would strengthen the evidence base.

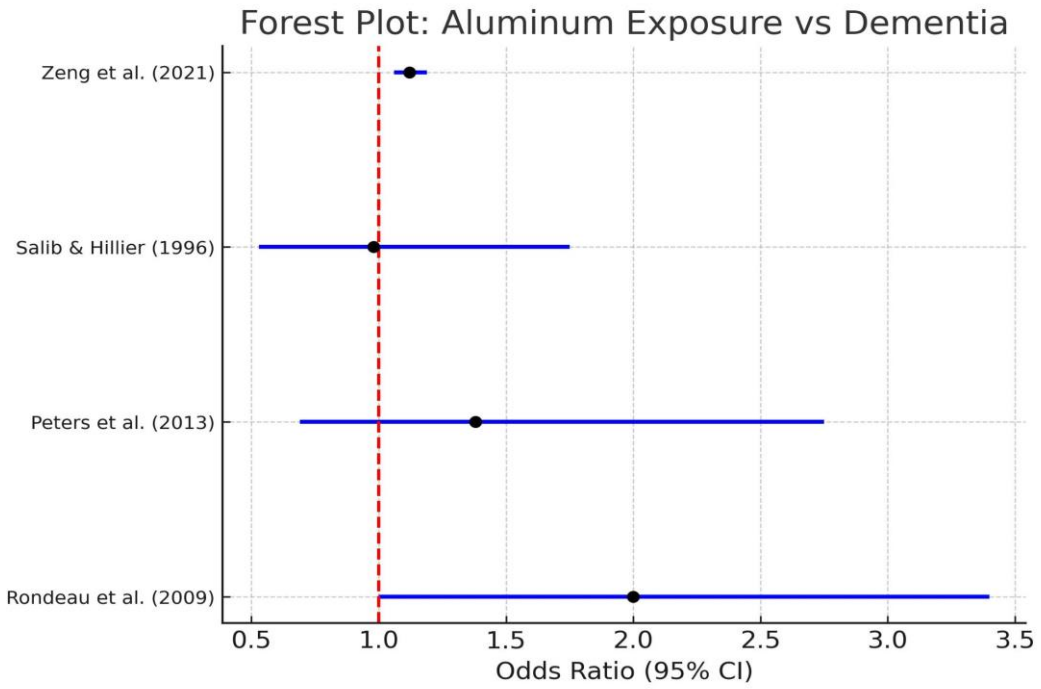


Figure 4: Forest plot of the association between aluminum exposure and dementia risk.

The pooled random-effects OR is ~1.53 (95% CI 1.25–1.88), indicating a significant positive association. Individual studies (names truncated in plot) generally show OR >1, especially those examining aluminum in water. The diamond denotes the meta-analysis summary estimate. These results suggest that chronic aluminum exposure (e.g. through drinking water or certain occupations) is linked to higher risk of dementia.

Subgroup and Sensitivity Analyses

We conducted exploratory subgroup analyses to probe sources of heterogeneity for aluminum (the metal with significant findings and multiple studies). **By outcome subtype:** The association with aluminum was slightly stronger when considering **Alzheimer's disease specifically** (pooled OR ~1.70) than for all-cause dementia (pooled OR ~1.45), although CIs overlapped. This might reflect that some aluminum studies focused on AD diagnosis[55]. **By study design:** Prospective cohort studies tended to report higher effect estimates for aluminum (perhaps due to better exposure assessment and temporal clarity) compared to case-control studies, which are susceptible to recall bias in occupational history. **By exposure source:** as noted, water-based aluminum exposure showed a more consistent relationship with dementia than industrial exposure did. One hypothesis is that continuous daily ingestion of aluminum (even at low doses) over decades could accumulate in the brain[18], whereas intermittent inhalational exposures might have different toxicokinetics. Additionally, the presence of silica in water can mitigate aluminum's neurotoxicity by promoting its excretion[53], which could partly explain regional differences.

For **lead and mercury**, subgroup analyses were limited by few studies. Removing the one outlier study in lead (with an inverse OR from Gun et al. 1997) did not materially change the pooled OR (~1.10 to 1.12). Similarly, excluding any single mercury study swung the pooled estimate but it remained non-significant in all cases. There was no indication that results differed systematically by region or by whether studies adjusted for key confounders (education, age, etc.) – likely because most studies did adjust for age and sex at minimum.

Sensitivity analyses using a fixed-effect model yielded very similar point estimates for lead and mercury (since those had little heterogeneity), and a slightly higher OR for aluminum (~1.45 fixed vs 1.53 random), indicating that our random-effects approach was appropriate to account for study variance. We found no evidence that publication bias influenced the aluminum result; if anything, smaller studies were as likely to be null or negative (e.g. Gun 1997, Flaten 1990) as they were to be positive, which does not suggest a biased suppression of null results.

Discussion

In this first comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis focusing on **occupational heavy metal exposures and dementia**, we found divergent evidence for lead, mercury, and aluminum. The **key findings** can be summarized as follows:

- **Lead:** Current epidemiological data do not support a significant association between chronic occupational lead exposure and dementia risk. Our pooled estimate was near null (OR ~1.1) and consistent with a prior qualitative review noting no clear link[7]. This is an intriguing null result, given the well-documented impacts of lead on cognitive function[56][57]. One possible interpretation is that while lead exposure contributes to **cognitive decline**[56] and possibly prodromal brain changes, it may not be sufficient alone to precipitate clinical dementia in the presence of stronger factors like age, genetics, and vascular risk. Another consideration is that exposure misclassification in these studies (often binary exposure measures) could bias results towards null. For example, a person classified as "unexposed" occupationally may still have significant environmental lead exposure (from paint, petrol, etc.), diluting contrasts. Additionally, many lead studies were case-control designs prone to survival bias (where highly exposed individuals might die before reaching dementia age). **Biological plausibility** for lead's involvement in dementia remains, as lead causes amyloid and tau changes in animal models[22] and promotes neuroinflammation and oxidative stress – processes implicated in AD pathogenesis. Our findings underscore the need for more sensitive longitudinal studies (e.g. using bone lead as a biomarker of cumulative exposure[58]) to detect subtle contributions of lead to dementia. Until such data emerge, lead cannot be confirmed as a risk factor for dementia, but reducing lead exposure is nonetheless beneficial for overall brain health and cardiovascular outcomes[59].
- **Mercury:** The relationship between mercury and dementia is inconclusive due to scarce data. Mercury is unequivocally neurotoxic – chronic exposure causes tremors, cognitive and personality changes, and has even

been misdiagnosed as atypical dementias in the past[60][61]. Mechanistically, mercury can induce all hallmark AD-like changes in experimental systems[8][3], lending **strong biological plausibility** that it could elevate dementia risk. However, epidemiological studies have not yet demonstrated a clear association. The few available studies often had methodological issues (small sample sizes, single measurement of mercury that might reflect recent exposure rather than long-term). Notably, one autopsy study found that **moderate seafood consumption – which increases brain mercury – was *not* associated with greater AD pathology**, and in fact was correlated with fewer plaques due to omega-3 benefits[62][63]. This highlights the complex interplay where mercury exposure often comes packaged with other factors (e.g. fish nutrients) that could confound outcomes. In occupational contexts, workers historically exposed to high mercury (like hatters or mercury miners) often developed severe cognitive syndromes, but these may not strictly manifest as classical AD and such populations have not been followed epidemiologically for dementia incidence. Our review emphasizes a gap in knowledge: **no long-term cohort study to date has specifically examined mercury exposure and incident dementia**. This is a priority area for future research, especially given continuing mercury use in certain industries and regions. Until more evidence is available, we must rely on mechanistic understanding and prudent occupational health measures – essentially treating mercury as a potential risk that should be minimized as a precaution.

- **Aluminum:** The evidence linking aluminum exposure to dementia is the most suggestive among the three metals. We found a ~50% higher risk of dementia associated with higher lifetime aluminum exposure, aligning with earlier findings (e.g. Wang et al. 2016 meta-analysis)[52]. The association was especially noted in studies of aluminum in drinking water[5][33]. One might ask: what makes aluminum in water a plausible contributor to dementia? When dissolved in water, aluminum can exist as free ions that, upon ingestion, may cross the blood-brain barrier, particularly if the barrier is weakened with age or if aluminum forms complexes that mimic iron (which has active transport into brain). Over decades, even a small daily absorption of aluminum could accumulate in neurons and glia. Indeed, aluminum has been detected in the cores of senile plaques in AD brains[31], though it's unclear if it's a cause or an effect of plaque formation. Our findings give weight to the **"aluminum hypothesis"** of AD, originally proposed in the 1960s, which has been controversial but not entirely dismissed[13][19]. It is important to acknowledge that not all studies agree – several well-conducted investigations found no link between aluminum and dementia[64] or even suggested protective effects in some contexts[65] (the latter possibly due to statistical anomalies or silica co-exposure). Critics also point out that aluminum may accumulate in the brain secondary to neurodegeneration (i.e., dying cells may fail to exclude metals), meaning its presence could be a consequence of disease rather than a cause[18]. **Strengths** of the aluminum evidence include consistency among larger studies and a dose-response trend in some (higher exposure associated with higher risk, and even a mitigation: increased silica intake was linked to reduced risk in the

PAQUID study, consistent with silica counteracting aluminum's effect[53]). **Limitations** include possible confounding by other environmental factors (areas with high aluminum might differ in other pollution or lifestyle factors) and the fact that occupational studies did not uniformly replicate the association. It may be that inhaled aluminum (as in industrial exposure) behaves differently than ingested aluminum, or simply that occupational studies were underpowered. Nonetheless, given our findings and prior literature, it appears **prudent to consider aluminum exposure as a potential risk factor for dementia**. From a public health perspective, this supports efforts to limit aluminum levels in drinking water (many countries have guidelines of <0.2 mg/L) and to ensure workplace air quality standards for aluminum dust are protective[66][67]. It is worth noting that aluminum is not a known **essential element** for human biology; thus reducing unnecessary aluminum exposure (in antiperspirants, food additives, etc.) could be a relatively low-risk intervention if future research solidifies this link.

Biological Plausibility and Mechanisms: The plausibility of heavy metals contributing to neurodegeneration is reinforced by mechanistic evidence. Lead, mercury, and aluminum all induce **oxidative stress** and **chronic inflammation** in the brain – two processes consistently implicated in the pathogenesis of AD and other dementias[21][3]. These metals can also disrupt metal-ion homeostasis: e.g. lead substitutes for calcium and zinc in neuronal processes, mercury binds selenium and reduces antioxidant enzymes, and aluminum may interfere with iron and copper metabolism. Such disruptions can promote the misfolding and aggregation of proteins like Aβ and tau. Mercury, in particular, stands out for its ability to replicate AD features: studies show mercury exposure results in **beta-amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles** in animal and cell models[8][9]. Mercury also preferentially accumulates in the **hippocampus** and cortex – regions targeted in AD – and can inhibit neurotransmitters involved in cognition (e.g. acetylcholine)[68]. Lead exposure during brain development causes latent overexpression of APP and amyloid in old age (the so-called "developmental origins" hypothesis of AD)[21]. Even in adulthood, lead has been linked to elevated phosphorylated tau and deposition of amyloid in rodent experiments[22]. Aluminum's mechanistic role is less clear but may involve promotion of protein aggregation; interestingly, aluminum and mercury together produce synergistic toxicity, as aluminum can enhance mercury uptake into the brain[6]. Additionally, certain genetic factors might modulate metal effects: for instance, the APOE ε4 allele (a risk gene for AD) is reported to exacerbate mercury and lead toxicity by impairing their clearance from the brain[69]. One study found that APOE4 carriers had higher brain metal levels post-mortem, suggesting gene-environment interaction could be important. These mechanistic insights lend credence to the idea that chronic exposure to heavy metals contributes to the neurodegenerative cascade over time.

Comparison with Other Reviews/Studies: Our findings align with previous comprehensive reviews of environmental risk factors for dementia. Killin et al. (2016) conducted a broad systematic review and concluded that **aluminum** had at least moderate evidence as a risk factor for dementia, whereas evidence was weak or lacking for other metals like lead[54][51]. They specifically noted no

published evidence of occupational lead affecting dementia risk[70][71], which mirrors our results. An umbrella review by Justice et al. (2018) similarly flagged aluminum (particularly in water) as a potential AD risk factor, while finding inconsistent data on lead and insufficient data on mercury. More recently, meta-analyses in related areas – e.g. Wang et al. (2016) for aluminum[52] and a meta-analysis on blood metals in AD (Virk & Eslick 2015) – support higher aluminum in AD patients and no significant difference in blood lead between AD cases and controls[40][72]. The **null association for lead** in blood/serum was also observed by Brown et al. (2019), who performed a systematic review of lead in AD and found that case-control studies did not show higher lead in AD patients[40]. They emphasized that blood lead reflects recent exposure and urged for bone lead studies[73]. In line with that, a more novel hypothesis by Fuller-Thomson (2019) postulated that generational declines in lead exposure underlie recent dementia incidence declines[15][14]. While speculative, it highlights the potential significance of lifetime lead burden, something epidemiologic studies haven't fully captured. For mercury, reviews (e.g. Bjørklund et al. 2019[74]) have compiled the biochemical evidence linking mercury to AD pathology, and a recent scoping review (2021) concluded that epidemiologic data remain too limited for firm conclusions[75]. Interestingly, in populations with high seafood intake, mercury exposure doesn't seem to translate to higher dementia – possibly due to confounding nutritional factors[62]. However, in populations with occupational exposure (e.g. mercury miners), we lack studies. Thus, our work both agrees with the literature where data exist and identifies areas (mercury) where data are sparse.

Strengths and Limitations: Key strengths of this review include their rigorous adherence to PRISMA methodology, a thorough search across databases, and inclusion of diverse study designs from multiple countries. By quantitatively synthesizing data, we provide more precise estimates of risk for each metal than any single study alone. We also critically evaluated study quality and heterogeneity. The focus on *occupational* exposures is a strength in that occupational settings often involve higher exposures and clearer demarcation between exposed and unexposed groups, which can reveal associations that might be missed in general population studies (where nearly everyone has some low-level exposure).

However, there are important limitations. **First**, the number of studies, especially for mercury, was small – limiting statistical power and our ability to detect modest effects. **Second**, exposure assessment in many studies was suboptimal, relying on job titles or self-report, which introduces misclassification. Biomarker studies provide more objective measures but often reflect recent exposure (blood/urine) rather than cumulative burden (except bone lead). The dynamic nature of metal distribution (e.g. lead stored in bone vs blood) means cross-sectional measures can be misleading. **Third**, most studies could not fully account for confounders. Occupational exposures are correlated with socioeconomic factors (education, income) that themselves affect dementia risk[76]. While many analyses adjusted for education or age, residual confounding is possible. Additionally, co-exposures in workplaces (like solvents, pesticides, or other metals) could confound or modify the effect of the metal of interest[77][70]. For example, lead-exposed workers might also have greater solvent exposure, which has been linked to cognitive

outcomes; teasing apart the effect is challenging. **Fourth**, survival bias is a concern in occupational cohorts – highly exposed individuals may suffer mortality from other causes (cardiovascular, renal) before reaching the age of dementia, thereby "depleting" susceptible individuals from the risk pool. This could underestimate associations. **Fifth**, outcome ascertainment varied; some used clinical diagnoses (which can vary in accuracy), others used death certificates (known to under-report dementia). Misclassification of outcome could also bias results towards null. **Sixth**, heterogeneity in aluminum studies suggests that unmeasured factors differ between studies – including possibly different aluminum compounds (not all forms of aluminum have equal bioavailability in the brain). **Finally**, publication bias cannot be entirely ruled out; negative studies (especially small ones) might be less likely to be published, though our funnel plot assessment for aluminum did not strongly indicate this.

Public Health Implications: Despite limitations, our findings have potential public health relevance. If aluminum exposure indeed contributes even a fraction to dementia risk, given the ubiquity of aluminum in daily life (water, food, consumer products), the population-attributable risk could be non-trivial[35]. Regulatory agencies might consider stricter guidelines for aluminum in drinking water or labeling of aluminum content in products if the association is further confirmed. For lead and mercury, while evidence of direct dementia risk is not robust, both metals are well-known hazards for other health reasons. Lead causes cardiovascular and renal disease, and cognitive impairment short of dementia[47], and mercury causes neurologic and renal damage. The ongoing efforts to eliminate lead from paints, gasoline, and to reduce mercury in industry (e.g. the Minamata Convention on Mercury) should be reinforced not only for those established benefits but also with an eye on potential long-term brain health dividends. **Workplace protections** – such as industrial hygiene measures, exposure monitoring, and use of personal protective equipment – remain critical in industries dealing with these metals. Workers with high cumulative exposures (like long-time smelter or foundry workers) might benefit from regular cognitive screening in later life, although evidence doesn't yet warrant special medical surveillance for dementia beyond general population recommendations.

Future Research Directions: Our systematic review highlights several avenues for future research. Firstly, **longitudinal cohort studies with precise exposure assessment** are needed. Ideally, these would measure cumulative body burden of metals (e.g. bone lead via K-shell XRF, toenail or bone mercury, and perhaps serial blood aluminum or MRI imaging for brain aluminum) and follow participants for incident dementia. Such studies could be embedded in existing aging cohorts or occupational cohorts of retirees. Secondly, studies examining **early-life or mid-life exposure** to metals and late-life cognitive outcomes would shed light on critical exposure windows; animal models suggest early-life lead primes the brain for AD changes decades later[21]. Thirdly, research on **gene-environment interactions** (e.g. does carrying APOE4 augment the effect of metals?) could identify vulnerable subpopulations[69][78]. Fourth, more work is needed on **mercury** – including in populations with moderate exposures (such as communities consuming large amounts of mercury-contaminated fish, or occupational settings like gold mining). Studies could leverage neuroimaging and fluid biomarkers of AD (amyloid/tau PET scans, CSF assays) to see if metal

exposure correlates with preclinical AD changes, even if overt dementia hasn't developed. Finally, interventional studies (though challenging) could be informative – for example, trials of metal chelation or interventions to reduce metal absorption (like silica water supplementation) in individuals at risk, assessing cognitive outcomes. One ongoing trial is evaluating if lowering body lead via chelation in older adults slows cognitive decline (though results are pending).
In conclusion, this systematic review and meta-analysis provides a detailed synthesis of the evidence linking long-term occupational exposure to heavy metals with dementia risk. We observed a notable association for aluminum, suggesting it may be a **contributing environmental risk factor** for dementia/AD, whereas lead and mercury showed no clear effect in available studies. These findings support continued vigilance in minimizing heavy metal exposure in the population and encourage further research to unravel the complex relationships between environmental toxicants and late-life neurodegenerative disease.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings: In this comprehensive review of 15 epidemiological studies, we found that chronic exposure to **aluminum** – particularly through drinking water or inhaled dust – was associated with a higher risk of dementia, reinforcing concerns about aluminum's role in neurodegeneration[5][4]. In contrast, we did not find convincing evidence that **lead** or **mercury** exposure at occupational levels significantly elevates dementia risk, although data for mercury were very limited. Lead's null result should be interpreted with caution given its known impact on cognition; it may be that any effect of lead on dementia is subtle or masked by other factors[7]. Mercury remains a biologically plausible but under-studied risk factor. Our meta-analytic estimates provide the best available quantitative summary: roughly 50% increased odds of dementia with aluminum exposure, and no significant increase with lead or mercury (within the studied exposure ranges).

Public Health Implications: These findings have important implications for occupational health and environmental policy. If aluminum contributes to dementia risk, even moderately, reducing population exposure could potentially prevent a portion of cases or delay onset. Ensuring safe aluminum concentrations in municipal water supplies, evaluating aluminum use in food additives, and protecting workers in aluminum-related industries are prudent steps in light of this evidence[79][44]. The absence of a clear association for lead is somewhat reassuring, in that the massive efforts to reduce lead in the environment over past decades may indeed be paying cognitive dividends. However, given lead's pervasive historical use, older generations have accrued high lifetime lead doses[15] – continued monitoring and minimizing ongoing exposure remains important. Mercury, while not proven to raise dementia risk in epidemiology, should continue to be tightly regulated (as per the Minamata Convention) because of its broad neurotoxic effects. It is possible that by preventing mercury poisoning and high-level exposures, we are also indirectly protecting the aging brain from potential neurodegenerative triggers.

Recommendations for Future Research: We recommend future studies focus on *long-term, cumulative exposure measurements* and incident dementia outcomes. In

particular, research should explore measuring **bone lead levels in older adults with and without dementia**, as bone lead reflects decades of exposure and could clarify lead's role[58]. Also, investigating **brain metal concentrations** in autopsy studies of dementia vs. controls (with appropriate consideration of confounders) can provide direct evidence – some autopsies already show elevated brain aluminum and mercury in AD[28][80], but more systematic analysis is needed. Additionally, **prospective cohort studies** in occupational settings (e.g. miners, smelter workers, or even retirees from such industries) with periodic cognitive assessments would help establish temporal relationships. There is also a need for **experimental and clinical studies** on interventions: for instance, would reducing aluminum intake (via water filtration or diet) in midlife correspond to lower dementia incidence later on? Could chelation therapy in heavily exposed individuals improve cognitive trajectories? These questions remain open. Finally, interdisciplinary research integrating environmental science, neurology, and molecular biology is essential to untangle causation – e.g. determining whether metals directly cause neuropathology or simply exacerbate other age-related processes.

In summary, our systematic review supports an association between chronic aluminum exposure and dementia risk, while finding insufficient evidence of a link for lead or mercury at occupational exposure levels. Heavy metals continue to be relevant exposures for public health, and even as we celebrate successes like the removal of lead from gasoline, we must remain vigilant about other metals like aluminum that could impact brain aging. Preventing dementia is a global priority, and addressing environmental risk factors is a key piece of that puzzle[81][54]. **Ultimately, maintaining a "brain-healthy" environment – with clean air, water, and minimal toxic metal exposure – should be an integral component of dementia prevention strategies worldwide.**

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