

# Keeping Your Brain Healthy as You Age

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Concern about brain health, memory and cognitive functions can increase as a person ages. Although jokes abound about aging and diminished brain functioning, a normal aging brain does not deteriorate to the point of losing functions. When this does happen, it is an abnormal process called dementia. Dementia is a clinical syndrome whereby there is damage to brain cell connections which lead to a loss in memory and other cognitive brain abilities. It can result from various diseases and conditions, the most common cause being Alzheimer's disease.



More recently, brain research findings demonstrate that the brain does not lose the vast amount of brain cells with aging as previously thought. In fact, studies support that the normal aging process leaves most mental functions intact and may actually improve in some areas such as verbal knowledge and processes that form the basis of wisdom. What has become quite evident is that retaining high level brain function as we age has more to do with practicing a healthy lifestyle and risk factor reduction than with the aging process.

## **Brain Food**

Current scientific studies reveal, in general, what is good for the heart is also good for the brain. Therefore, a diet rich in whole foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein helps to preserve healthy brain function. Similarly, regular aerobic exercise delivers oxygen rich blood to the brain cells. According to Dr Carl Corman, a neurobiologist at University of California-Irvine, "You are literally building the structure of the brain by moving your feet". Exercise enhances concentration, builds gray matter and strengthens the connections in the brain among other things.

## **Mental Olympics**

The "use it or lose it" adage applies to brain health as well. Performing mental exercise or "neurobics" as they are called, increases our brain power as we age and helps to keep the healthy connections going. So activities that challenge and stimulate our brains like puzzles, word games, reading and learning new skills on a regular basis boost that gray matter. Try some of these ideas for mental exercise:

<http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/exercise.html#mentalexercise>

## **Be Drug Free**

Avoiding risky behaviors such as smoking, recreational drug use and heavy drinking is highly recommended since these behaviors not only diminish oxygen to the brain but also expose it to toxic substances. Read more about brain function and drugs at

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/scienceofaddiction/brain.html>

## **Protect Your Noggin**

Practicing "head safe" behavior at all times by wearing head protection while performing sports, biking and "buckling up" when riding in a vehicle, can prevent head trauma which can lead to cognitive dysfunction. Alzheimer's studies demonstrate that patients with Alzheimer's disease were nearly 10 times more likely to have a history of a head injury that resulted in a loss of consciousness.

## **Sleep It Off**

Getting between 7 and 8 hours of sleep each night is crucial to healthy brain function. Find out just how important sleep a good night's sleep is to the brain health:

<http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/sleep.html#howsleep>

## **Stress-less**

Stress increases circulating adrenalin, raises the blood pressure and pulse which in turn can constrict blood vessels, thereby lowering oxygen to the brain cells. Learn how to manage your stress levels throughout the day by taking mini stress breaks such as: walking rapidly for a minute or two, climbing a set of stairs or doing stretches at your desk side. Also, regularly relieving your brain of negative or stressful thoughts by practicing relaxation techniques each day can keep stress at bay. Read more about stress and its effects on the brain at:

<http://health.discovery.com/centers/brain-health/brain-disorders-conditions/dementia/stress.html>

Then try some of these relaxation techniques for the University of Maryland Medical Center:

[http://www.umm.edu/sleep/relax\\_tech.htm](http://www.umm.edu/sleep/relax_tech.htm)

So, wisdom can come with age, when you make brain health part of your daily plan.

## **More Resources**

How the Brain Functions

<http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/exercise.html>

Foods for Your Brain

[http://www.alz.org/we\\_can\\_help\\_adopt\\_a\\_brain\\_healthy\\_diet.asp](http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_adopt_a_brain_healthy_diet.asp)

Exercise and Your Brain

<http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/guide/train-your-brain-with-exercise>

Myths about the Aging Brain

[http://www.aarp.org/health/brain/aging/myths\\_about\\_aging\\_and\\_the\\_brain.html](http://www.aarp.org/health/brain/aging/myths_about_aging_and_the_brain.html)

50 Ways to Boost Your Noodle

[http://www.aarp.org/health/healthyliving/brain\\_health/articles/noodle\\_boosters.html](http://www.aarp.org/health/healthyliving/brain_health/articles/noodle_boosters.html)

Memory Boosters

<http://www.webmd.com/brain/features/smart-smarter>

Brain Health

[http://www.alz.org/we\\_can\\_help\\_brain\\_health\\_maintain\\_your\\_brain.asp](http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_brain_health_maintain_your_brain.asp)

More Relaxation techniques

[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress\\_relief\\_meditation\\_yoga\\_relaxation.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_relief_meditation_yoga_relaxation.htm)