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Brain Fitness at Any Age

Ten things to keep your brain fit!

1. Keep moving and pump some iron

Benefits: Helps prevent bone density loss, maintain balance, and helps prevent diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers.



Goal:

- Get at least 150 minutes of exercise each week. Move about 30 minutes on most days. Walking is a good start.
- Join programs like Strong Women, Strong Bones that can help you learn to improve your strength and flexibility.
- Check with your health care provider if you haven't been active and want to start a vigorous exercise program.

2. Eat like a Greek

The same diet that can help us stay strong and healthy provides the nutrition necessary for a healthy brain.

Make sure to include in your diet:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains
- Lean meats, fish and poultry
- Low-fat or non-fat dairy products
- Less solid fat, sugar, and salt
- Proper portion sizes
- Adequate fluids



Make sure to get your antioxidants! Vitamin C, Vitamin E, and Beta-carotene rich foods are excellent sources. Other vitamins and minerals that help with brain health are vitamin B12, Folate and selenium. DHA is one of the omega-3 fatty acids needed for brain function.

3. Think about your drink

Caffeine has a short term effect of speeding up neurons within our brain. It increases our heartbeat, raises our blood pressure and releases sugar into the bloodstream for extra energy. It is unknown if it has any benefit on general brain function. The recommendation is to drink caffeinated beverages in moderation.

Alcohol - We know that excessive consumption of alcohol damages the brain. So, if you don't drink, don't start. If you do drink, limit yourself to no more than one drink a day. One drink is 12 oz. of beer, 1.5 oz. of distilled spirits, or 5 oz. of wine.

4. Reduce your risks from diabetes and smoking

Diabetes - can affect the brain in two main ways. It can damage the arteries that supply blood to the brain, and it can prevent brain cells from getting an adequate supply of glucose.

If you have diabetes, it is important to keep a check on it. If you have never been checked for diabetes, consider getting checked. Many people with diabetes do not know that they have it. Sometimes people with diabetes may feel unusually tired, urinate frequently, or feel very hungry or thirsty. If you have these symptoms, it is important to get screened.

Smoking - Long-term smokers run the following risks:

- The carotid artery being blocked which supplies blood to the brain cells. This can result in a stroke. Smokers have a 1.5 greater risk than non-smokers to have a stroke.
- If you smoke, work on trying to cut back and quit.

5. Use it or lose it - seek out new skills

Just as we exercise our bodies to keep them in working order, so must we exercise our brains to stay mentally agile and adapt.

It is the use-it-or-lose-it theory.

By engaging in mentally stimulating activities, we can maintain our brain functions as we age. We can continue to grow new connections among the billions of brain cells we possess by learning new things. Stimulate new areas of your brain by intellectually challenging yourself.

- Do mentally stimulating activities
- Read books and magazines
- Play games
- Learn new things
- Take or teach a class
- Be social through work or volunteering



6. Stay connected - get a social life

The support we receive from our friends, family, and colleagues helps maintain our mental health.

Studies have shown that those who are engaged with family and community groups take longer to show the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease than those who are socially isolated.

Here are some helpful tips:

- Look on the bright side.
- Stay connected spiritually.

7. Reduce your stress

Stress wears our bodies down and increases blood pressure and the risk of heart disease, it can also affect the way we think, our moods, and ability to remember. In fact, the hormones our bodies release when we are under stress may shrink the brain, affecting memory and learning. Stress can also cause or contribute to depression and anxiety.

What can you do to reduce stress in your life?

- Exercise
- Relax
- Socialize
- Empower yourself
- Laugh and have a sense of humor
- Think positively

Meditation Technique

- Sit comfortably and close your eyes.
- Start with your toes and try to relax your muscles.
- Continue to work your way up your body slowly, relaxing and releasing the tension in each part of your body until you reach your head.
- Now focus on your breathing.
- Breathe slowly in and out of your nose.
- Breathe deeply at first and then whatever way feels comfortable
- Try to clear your mind. Think about a place where you feel totally relaxed, such as at the beach or floating on a cloud.
- Continue to focus on your breathing while you continue to relax.
- Slowly open your eyes and take a couple of deep breathes.

Meditation is a way to boost your brain fitness, so give it a try and see if it works for you.

8. Get a purpose in life

What is your mission in your life? Discovering your mission will help you stay sharp. Those who approach life with clear intentions and goals are more likely to keep their brains active and healthy.

9. Protect yourself from brain injuries

As we get older we are at higher risk of falling and other accidents that can cause brain injury.

How can you reduce your risk?

- Buckle up!
- Wear a helmet when on a bike or motorcycle.
- Avoid exposure to toxins by taking sensible precautions and read the labels for safe handling.
- Have your car and furnace serviced regularly.
- Exercise to improve balance and coordination.

10. Get adequate sleep

People who don't sleep well at night tend to be more forgetful than those who sleep sound. Sleep may aid memory in another way by lowering levels of stress hormones. With age, people become more prone to sleep disorders.

The following practices can help with insomnia...

- Establish and maintain a consistent sleep schedule.
- Do vigorous exercise early in the day.
- Watch your caffeine level later in the day.
- Avoid excessive napping during the daytime.
- Don't take sleeping pills unless nothing else works.

What can you do to help improve your memory?

- Don't expect to remember everything.
- (Use lists, calendars, reminders, and other memory aides. For example, write down appointments on your calendar and keep a list of chores in your pocket.
- Develop routines to help you remember. Take medicines the same time every day. Leave your keys in the same place.
- Visual memory tends to be better than auditory memory. That is, it's easier to remember what we see than what we hear. Using both at the same time will enhance memory. For example, if you need to pick up fruit at the grocery store, picture blueberries in the produce aisle.
- Associating stories with new things or ideas is also helpful.
- Increasing attention improves learning and memory. When learning something new, limit the distractions (turn off the TV and choose a quiet room), and focus your attention.
- More time helps learning and recall. Allow yourself additional time and have patience.

Developed by Nancy Schultz, Family Living Educator, Shawano County UW-Extension, 2016
Sources:

http://www.acl.gov/Get_Help/BrainHealth/docs/BrainHealthEducatorGuide.pdf

The Sharp Brains Guide to Brain Fitness: How to Optimize Brain Health and Performance at Any Age by Alvaro Fernandez and Dr. Elkhonon Goldberg. April 2013.