

Busyness May Protect Cognitive Function

By: [*Providence Medical Group*](#)

Want to maintain a sharp mind as you age? Get busy. New [research](#) shows that adults who are 50-plus years old and have a busy lifestyle tend to do better on cognitive function tests than those who don't fill their time with activities.

The research is part of the [Dallas Lifespan Brain Study](#) at the Center for Longevity, which is at the University of Texas at Dallas. Researchers at the center are trying to understand what a healthy brain looks like and how it functions at each decade of life from age 20 through 90.

What busyness looks like

For the center's latest work, researchers led by Sara Festini, Ph.D., surveyed 330 healthy men and women between 50 and 89 in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The participants were asked questions about how active they were. Some examples:

- How busy are you during an average day?
- How often do you have too many things to do each day to actually get them all done?
- How often do you have so many things to do that you go to bed later than your regular bedtime?

The participants also took part in a long series of neuropsychological tests to measure their cognitive performance.

Festini and her team looked at five core cognitive areas:

- Brain processing speed
- Working memory
- Episodic memory
- Reasoning
- Crystallized knowledge

The results and what they may, or may not, mean

The researchers found that across all education levels, people who are busy have superior brain processing speed, working memory, reasoning skills and vocabulary. Busy people were especially good at remembering past events, what is known as [episodic memory](#).

The researchers cautioned that their work isn't enough to say conclusively that busyness is responsible for better cognitive function.

They said people with better cognitive function may actually seek out a busy lifestyle. They also noted that busy people have more opportunities to learn because they are exposed to more information and life experiences. An earlier study at the Center for Vital Longevity found that those who learned new skills such as digital photography or quilting increased their episodic memory. In other words, learning may protect cognitive function.

How to take care of your brain

[The National Institute on Aging](#) says we should all take the following steps to take care of our brains and our overall health as well:

- Control risk factors for chronic disease such as heart disease and diabetes.
- Exercise regularly and get physical activity.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes fruits and vegetables.
- Engage in intellectually stimulating activities and maintain close social ties with family, friends and community.

Common signs of cognitive decline

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists these indicators as signs of [cognitive impairment](#):

- Memory loss
- Frequently asking the same question or repeating the same story
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Trouble coming up with the right words to name objects
- Frequently forgetting events and appointments
- Not recognizing familiar people and places
- Having trouble exercising judgment

If you have concerns about your cognitive function or that of a loved one, or want to learn more about maintaining cognitive function, talk to your health care provider.

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