

Mind Games: Keep Your Memory Fit

As we age, most of us become increasingly forgetful. We misplace keys, forget names, and fumble for the title of a favorite song – right on the tip of our tongue, then gone. Studies suggest that nearly 40 percent of people over age 65 have some memory loss.

Many things contribute to forgetfulness. Lack of sleep can affect acuity. Stress, anxiety and medications can cloud the mind. And with each passing decade, the hippocampus—the area of your brain responsible for building memory—loses 5 percent of its nerve cells. At the same time, aging slows the production of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter vital to learning and memory.

This doesn't mean we're doomed to total memory loss, however. Research shows that our brains are flexible and able to form new, memory-building neural connections throughout life. In other words, your brain continues to change and adapt as you age. If you put some effort into exercising it—the same way you might work out your body—you'll have a better chance of retaining healthy brain function.

Socializing is brain food

“Keep your brain active,” says Aaditya Singhal, M.D., a specialist in family and geriatric medicine at Providence Medical Group in Monroe, Wash. In your 50s and 60s, he says, it's especially important to stay both physically and mentally active.

Mental activity can take many forms. For starters, Dr. Singhal recommends crossword puzzles or Sudoku to his patients. Sudoku is a numbers game similar to a crossword puzzle—it exercises the memory and also requires logical thinking.

Outside of brain exercises, Dr. Singhal recommends regular social interactions. Although socializing may not have a direct effect on memory retention, it can help enhance your overall well-being, which, in turn, can improve brain function.

“People who frequently interact with others have more emotional and social support, which can help stave off depression,” Dr. Singhal says. “Depression can contribute to dementia-like symptoms in older adults.”

Learning to speak another language or to play a musical instrument have proven, positive effects on brain development and function, as well, says Dr. Singhal. “It's good to pursue activities that challenge your mind,” he says, “but make sure you choose activities that you enjoy enough to commit the time and effort.”

Move your body, help your mind

Physical activity is essential to maintaining health and weight – and it's good for our brains. During exercise, memory and thinking are affected through both direct and indirect means.

Directly, exercise stimulates the release of chemicals in the brain that affect the health of brain cells, the growth of new blood vessels and neurons in the brain, and the abundance and survival of new brain cells.

Indirectly, exercise improves mood and sleep, and reduces stress and anxiety. When any of these is out of balance, it can greatly impair memory and thinking.

Exercise has even been identified as a potential way to reduce or slow the progression of dementia symptoms. A recent study provided some evidence that exercise programs can help people with dementia perform their daily activities better.

While physical activity of any kind is beneficial, Dr. Singhal often recommends tai chi to his older patients, because it supports cognitive function and helps develop balance and strength. Yoga has similar benefits, especially when combined with meditation. Research has shown that mindfulness meditation can improve memory recall. For people who enjoy online activities, Dr. Singhal suggests a brain-training program such as Lumosity.

Dementia and MCI

For some older people, forgetfulness may be a sign of a serious problem, such as mild cognitive impairment (MCI) or dementia, a general term for memory loss that is severe enough to affect a person's daily life.

People with MCI have more memory problems than what is normal for their age. Although they're able to carry out their typical daily activities, they may forget important events and appointments, and family members may notice their memory lapses.

Dementia seriously affects a person's ability to function. In addition to losing their memory, people with dementia may lose the ability to reason and follow directions, to maintain personal hygiene and nutrition, and to be aware of safety.

Types of dementia include:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia
- Mixed dementia (Alzheimer's and vascular)
- Lewy body dementia
- Alcohol-induced dementia

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