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Smart Ways to Boost Brain Health

Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

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Just as you can control and improve your general physical health with good habits, so too can you improve the health of your brain—boosting your memory and mental agility, as well as reducing your risk of developing Alzheimer’s Disease or other dementias.

Although research is finding links between genes and one’s risk of Alzheimer’s Disease, the exact cause is more likely a combination of genetics and other factors. Practicing good brain health at any age can help stave off the disease, as well as build up your cognitive reserve. Cognitive reserve is a term describing the brain’s resilience toward damage.

The good news is that our brains are able to continue forming new neural connections throughout our life cycle. (This is called neuroplasticity.) In other words, no matter what your age, your brain health can improve as the internal structure of its neurons changes and as the number of synapses between neurons increases. Both of these phenomena can be triggered by changes in our behavior, environment, and learning.

You can boost your brain health by focusing on healthy habits in six areas: heart health, nutrition, physical activity, social engagement, cognitive engagement, and stress management.

1. Heart Health

It seems obvious: by keeping your heart healthy and your blood flow moving, your brain will be “well-fed” with the food and oxygen carried by the blood. Scientific research suggests that conditions including high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and high cholesterol may increase the risk of Alzheimer’s or vascular dementia.

2. Nutrition

We are all aware of the effect that our diet has on our bodies, but consider how it also directly affects the brain. Research suggests that some foods are bad for the brain, including those high in saturated fat and cholesterol such as high-fat beef, processed meats, organ meats, and eggs. Try to maintain a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, along with foods that contain omega-3 and fatty acids (fish and seafood, soy and soy-based foods, walnuts), B vitamins (dark green leafy vegetables, fortified whole-grain cereals, milk and milk products, poultry, fish), folic acid (whole grains and legumes), and antioxidants (berries, beans, apples). Finally, maintaining a healthy body weight is also beneficial to brain health.

3. Physical Activity

It’s never too late to start exercising! Research has shown that older adults who engage in cardiovascular exercise for 30 minutes each day perform

better on cognitive function. Additionally, studies show that daily physical activity may reduce the risk of Alzheimer's Disease and cognitive decline, even in adults over 80! Try incorporating a morning walk, bike ride, or exercise class into your daily routine.

The reason: Exercise sparks neurogenesis, or the creation of entirely new brain cells. In doing so, it may create functionally more efficient cognitive networks and provide a cognitive reserve.

4. Social Engagement

Your brain health will benefit from regular social engagement in activities that stimulate the mind and body. This could entail staying active in the workplace, volunteering in community groups and causes, travelling, or remaining active in a bridge club, square dancing group, book club, or other social groups.

5. Cognitive Engagement

Use it or lose it! Evidence suggests that lifelong learning can help our brains. Stay mentally engaged by taking a continuing education class at your local library or community center, or try some online memory games. Keep working those crossword puzzles, but try something new, like watching a foreign film or reading a different kind of book.

6. Stress Management

Chronic stress is bad for the brain. Studies have suggested that stress hormones appear to speed up the progression of Alzheimer's Disease within a short time period. You can reduce your stress with activities such as tai chi, meditation, or yoga, and practice some healthy behaviors that also help reduce stress levels. These include eating a healthy, well-balanced diet, avoiding too much alcohol, getting physical activity every day, and getting enough sleep.

The good news about brain health is that it's never too late to start the healthy habits that can improve your cognitive abilities and protect you against dementia. By focusing on the six areas outlined here and adapting your lifestyle, you can help ensure your brain stays healthy for as long as possible.