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How Exercise Keeps Your Brain Sharp

If you want to take care of your brain, you need to first take care of your body. Research consistently shows that people who lead a healthful lifestyle, including regular exercise and good nutrition, are less likely to experience cognitive declines associated with the aging process.

So, why is exercise so beneficial for your brain? Studies suggest that exercise can protect your brain from shrinkage as it ages. Exercise can promote neurogenesis, the formation of new brain cells in the brain's hippocampus — the part of your brain associated with memory, learning and emotions. Exercise also helps prevent many of the things that are linked to dementia, like obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and depression.

Perhaps you are a young adult and not thinking about developing dementia at this point in your life. Exercise helps your brain in many ways that are beneficial at any age. It can help you pay attention and focus, a benefit that is more noticeable after vigorous intensity exercise. It can also help you remember. Activities like walking, jogging, or gardening may help your brain's hippocampus grow. Some studies show this regrowth is even stronger if you like the activity you are doing.

Physical activity is one of the best ways to treat depression and anxiety. Exercise also helps improve blood flow, in part because it makes your heart and blood vessels stronger. Stronger blood vessels and better blood flow appear to help stop the buildup of plaques linked to dementia.

Have you ever taken a walk just to clear your head? Exercise can improve your ability to organize and interpret information so that it makes sense. And, it helps you get restful sleep. Exercise can help you manage mood swings, wind down at bedtime, and establish a healthy sleep-wake cycle, known as circadian rhythm. A restful, deep sleep helps revitalize your brain and body.

The Best Activities for Your Brain

You've heard this before, and it deserves repeating – the best activity is the one you will actually do. When it comes to exercise that is good for your body and your brain, the more the better. Remember those intervals (short bursts of vigorous activity) discussed in last week's newsletter? It turns out these activity "bursts" can improve the processing speed of your brain!

Here is something else to consider. Exercise can make your brain more flexible. Younger brains are generally more flexible than older ones, meaning they have the ability to change when you learn and experience new things. However, people of the same age can have very different brain capacities. It appears that both aerobic exercise and weight training can help your brain become more flexible.

A great way to keep your brain flexible and functioning well is to learn something new. It is important to continually introduce new challenges. Have you tried playing pickleball? This sport is good exercise for all ages and provides all the benefits of regular exercise, plus extra perks! The benefits include: lower blood pressure, stronger muscles, improved flexibility, better balance and agility, better footwork, and improved eye-hand coordination. Any activity that is good for your heart is also good for your brain. Pickleball (and its cousin, tennis) will force you to use your brain in different ways. Your short-term memory is engaged to keep up with the rules, the score, order of service, to develop strategies, and other aspects of the game. This week, think about new activities that interest you and give them a try!



What Stress Does to Your Body

Stress is how your body reacts to harmful situations – either real or perceived. You protect yourself during a stress response. You can feel changes in your body as your heart rate increases, breathing quickens, muscles tighten, and blood pressure rises.

Your body is designed to handle small doses of stress, but not long-term chronic stress. It can affect all parts of your life, including your emotions, thinking, behavior, and physical health. It can be difficult to determine if symptoms are caused by a medical condition or stress.

Chronic stress can cause or worsen many serious health conditions, such as: mental health problems, cardiovascular disease, obesity, eating disorders, menstrual problems, sexual dysfunction, skin and hair problems, and gastrointestinal problems.

Stress is a part of life and what matters most is how you handle it. Find resources on stress, resiliency, and mental health that are helpful for you (ksre-learn.com/mental-health). The best way to prevent stress overload and health consequences is to know your stress symptoms. If you are feeling overwhelmed by stress, talk with your doctor and together you can evaluate your symptoms and rule out other health conditions first. Also, create your own Wellness Toolbox (online.hpu.edu/blog/wellness-toolbox/) with coping skills that work best for you.

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What is the MIND Diet?

The MIND diet, founded on research on the role diet plays in brain health, was developed by Martha Clare Morris, Sc.D., and a team from Rush University Medical Center. The MIND diet is relatively new, and first published in 2015 in *Alzheimer's & Dementia*.

MIND stands for Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay. As the name describes, it is a combination of two well-known eating patterns: the Mediterranean diet and the DASH diet. In review, the Mediterranean diet includes rich healthful ingredients, like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds, flavored with herbs and spices. Fish, seafood, dairy, and poultry are included in moderation. Red meat and sweets are limited. Similar to the Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet focuses on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats. It also limits sodium, as the diet was developed to reduce hypertension.

Both of these have been linked to better brain health. The MIND diet is unique in that it also focuses on specific food and nutrients that boost and protect brain health, reducing the risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Healthy fats are a staple in this eating style. Olive oil, and other monounsaturated fats, lower total cholesterol and "bad" cholesterol levels. Nuts and seeds also contain monounsaturated fat. Fish and seafood contribute to polyunsaturated fats to help fight inflammation in the body. The omega-3 fatty acids they provide also help decrease triglycerides, reduce blood clotting, and lower the risk of stroke and heart failure.

A specific MIND diet recommendation is to eat leafy dark green vegetables every day. Research shows that eating one serving (1 cup) of leafy greens per day can make a significant impact on brain health. In addition, one of the most potent weapons against dementia and Alzheimer's disease are berry fruits. MIND diet guidelines recommend a minimum of two ½-cup servings of berries each week, and more is better.

To learn more about the MIND diet, and the importance of lifestyle habits, in preventing and/or delaying dementia and Alzheimer's disease, review Walk Kansas newsletters from 2022 (www.walkkansas.org/newsletter/2022.html) and this fact sheet, Healthy Body – Healthy Brain (ksre-learn.com/MF3602).

Blueberry Walnut Salad

Makes 8 Servings

Ingredients:

6 cups spring salad mix, with spinach
2 stalks celery
2 cups blueberries
1 green apple
½ cup walnuts, chopped

Citrus Salad Dressing:

Juice from 3 lemons or limes
4 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

1. Wash hands with soap and water.
2. Prepare produce and rinse under cold running water. Chop celery and apples.
3. In a large bowl, combine all the salad ingredients and stir or arrange until everything is spread out.
4. For the dressing, combine all ingredients in a small jar. Place lid on jar and shake to combine (or place in small bowl and whisk to combine.) Shake or whisk just prior to serving.
5. Serve salad with dressing on the side.

Nutrition Information per 1 cup serving and 1 tablespoon dressing: 150 calories; 12 g total fat (1.5 g saturated fat, 0 g trans-fat); 11 g carbohydrates; 2 g protein; 3 g fiber; 170 mg sodium; 6 g sugar.

