

11 Things to Know About Keeping Your Brain Healthy

No matter what our age, we all want our brains to function their best. However, this is of particular importance as we age.

We all know people who are of an advanced age who are as sharp as a tack, and others who are that same age who don't think clearly or quickly. We wonder what we need to do to end up like the first person.

Recently, the Institute of Medicine, which is the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences, released a report that identifies what helps and hurts brain function as we age. The results were published in this month's AARP bulletin.

Let's start with the bad news first so as to end on a positive note.

Things That Can Harm the Aging Brain

1. Depression. People who suffer from depression have an astounding double the risk for brain dysfunction, including dementia. One possible explanation is that depression causes changes in the brain's hippocampus.

2. Difficulty seeing and hearing. Being able to see and hear well are directly associated with healthy cognitive function, including memory. People who can't see or hear often avoid social interaction, which is a key factor in brain health. Also, according to a Johns Hopkins study, adults with hearing problems appear to have a greater rate of brain shrinkage as they age.

3. Medications. Antihistamines, sleep aids, and antidepressants have been shown to increase the risk of

dementia. So if you are depressed, which is also a risk factor, try to deal with it naturally, such as with adequate sleep, exercise, a healthy diet, and prayer.

4. Stress. Daily stress can cause memory problems, but stress that lasts for months and even years is associated with a faster decline of brain health. Many of us can't eliminate the stress in our lives, such as traffic jams and difficult relationships, but we can deal with stress effectively, in the same ways we deal with depression: adequate sleep, exercise, healthy diet, and prayer.

5. Air pollution: Long-term exposure to air pollution is linked with brain shrinkage, brain damage, and impaired brain function, according to one new study.

6. High blood pressure and diabetes: These are also risk factors for heart disease. Doctors have been linking brain health and heart health for years now. Exercising, eating right and maintaining a healthy weight can lower blood pressure and reverse diabetes.

Things That Help the Aging Brain

1. Exercise: The best is exercise that causes you to breathe heavily for at least 30 minutes straight ... combined with weight lifting. People whose brains benefited the most from exercise were people over the age of 65.

2. Intellectual stimulation: When it comes to the brain, "use it or lose it." Having a natural curiosity and continuing to learn are excellent for brain function. Some of the best ways to help your mind stay fit are learning a new language, reading, and writing.

3. Social stimulation. Connecting in a positive way with other people has been proven time and again to keep our minds young. Spending time with friends and loved ones, such as at church activities, volunteering, and playing games all help preserve

brain function.

4. Healthy diet. Stay away from processed foods containing hydrogenated oils (trans fats) and sugar. Research shows a link between packaged food and brain shrinkage. On the other hand, scientists have discovered healthy fats are good for the brain. These include fish oils and other Omega-3 fats as well as the fats in nuts, avocado, coconut oil, and olive oil.

5. Good sleep. This means getting plenty of deep, restful sleep. Some people suffer from sleep apnea, a condition that usually affects people who are overweight. It is a condition whereby the throat closes during sleep and causes the person to stop breathing temporarily and wake up momentarily, then go back to sleep ... a cycle that repeats itself all night long. As a result of the constant waking-up, people with sleep apnea never enter into the deep, restorative sleep necessary to repair our brains. People with sleep apnea are at increased risk for memory problems and dementia. If you suspect you might have sleep apnea, see your doctor as there is a non-pharmaceutical treatment called a CPAP that works great.

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