

AGING WELL

Diet and exercise help the mind and the body

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FAWHP

There's no mistaking that diet and exercise play an important role in keeping our bodies in shape and our health in optimal condition, but one key body part you may not think about during warm-up sessions is your brain. Recent research shows that the same sound nutrition and physical activity that benefits our physical structure can also energize brain growth and flex memory functions. That means, no matter what your age or health status, making these smart adjustments now can actually reduce your risk of developing cognitive impairments, such as Alzheimer's Disease, as you age.

A smarter workout

The relationship between regular exercise and memory deterioration in the brain was recently documented in a study re-

leased at the 2008 International Conference on Alzheimer's Disease in Chicago. The findings concluded that physical activity dramatically affects the memory center known as the hippocampus region — one of the first areas to suffer damage in Alzheimer's patients. One of the lead investigators in the study, Robyn A. Honea, Ph.D., expressed the positive outcome, saying, "We're able to locate the changes associated with fitness to the actual memory region, the hippocampus, which is a key area for Alzheimer's-related atrophy. This suggests that maintaining cardiorespiratory fitness may [encourage] positive [modifications]."

Another study by Columbia University Medical Center supported these findings and furthermore showed the ability of exercise to stimulate the growth of new nerve cells in the brain. This was considered impossible only a

few years ago.

In this study, people who engaged in aerobic exercise for just three months saw positive benefits, including the ability to recall events. The research also made another promising discovery, proving that regular exercise reduced the risk of Alzheimer's in those participants that were already genetically linked to the disease.

Food for thought

While exercise alone can introduce a myriad of health benefits for your brain, coupling the effort with healthy nutritional choices will only help to maximize your results. The best sources of daily intake include natural cognition enhancing foods such as certain produce, fish, and grains—and even indulgences like chocolate have their place in a brain-healthy diet.

The omega-3 components found in cold water fish (salmon, sardines,

tuna) and nuts (walnuts, almonds) are thought to protect the synaptic membranes — the junctions between nerve cells — which are key elements for learning and memory.

Vegetables like celery and green peppers contain a chemical called luteolin which helps to block inflammatory responses and may both prevent and treat neuro-inflammations like those found in Alzheimer's Disease and Creutzfeldt-Jakob's Disease. Fruit sources like berries are also high in antioxidants and are thought to decrease the brain damage from a stroke as well as the effects of Alzheimer's Disease or dementia.

Coffee drinkers may also benefit from making a switch to tea. Recent research found that those who drink two to three cups of black tea were less than half as likely to exhibit early cognitive decline thanks to its polyphenol makeup.

Polyphenols are thought to work in two ways: by preventing oxidation of brain cells and blocking the build-up of brain deposits or plaques.

Even dark chocolate can be good for you, in moderation. Treating yourself to a small amount each day will give you the benefit of high levels of antioxidants which absorb free radicals that damage cells while also keeping your cholesterol and blood pressure in check.

Smart minds think alike

The best way to make a plan for brain health and stick to it is through the support of friends and family. Not only will they help to motivate you to stick to your routine, but spending time with the people you cherish most is another proven way to sharpen your brain. Researchers at Harvard University found that those who participated in social activities such as church groups, book clubs or fre-

quent phone conversations each week actually had a lower rate of dementia. So, grab a friend and hit the gym or meet for a healthy lunch date. The more you do now, the more it will help your brain later.

Be sure to check with your healthcare provider before making changes in your nutrition habits or exercise regime to ensure the desired effects!

Based in Evanston, Mather LifeWays is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing a continuum of living and care, making neighborhoods better places for older adults. The organization also implements and shares progressive practices for wellness, workforce issues, memory care support, and empowering caregivers. Reed Engel is the Director of Wellness Strategies for Mather LifeWays. Reach him at rengel@matherlifeways.com.

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