



ENERGIZE YOUR BRAIN

7 Steps to Keep Your Mind Sharp

by David L. Meinz, MS, RDN, FAND, CSP

Do you occasionally have trouble remembering someone's name? When you take a shower, do you sometimes forget if you already washed your hair? Do you ever go into a room and can't remember why you're there? Do you sometimes repeat yourself? Do you sometimes repeat yourself? So, are you as mentally sharp as you were twenty years ago?

In today's fast-paced, hectic world you need your brain to be hitting on all cylinders. The health choices you make today can have a profound impact on the quality of your brain health now and in the future. Here's what you can do to keep your brain functioning at it's best:

1. Get Rid Of Tobacco

First and foremost, don't smoke cigarettes. One study showed that smokers were three times more likely to develop Alzheimer's. You've heard it all before, but quitting tobacco is the single best thing you can do for your health...and brain.

If you smoke cigarettes, you can stop reading at this point. Tell your doctor you want help getting tobacco out of your life. Try the patch, chew the gum, take a pill, and get the help you need to stop smoking. By the way, the patch works best if you put it directly over your mouth.

I have friends who smoked for 40 years. Cigarettes were as much a part of their life as their own name. Smoking was part of their identity. When you looked up "cigarette smoker" in the dictionary, you saw a picture of them. I would have bet good money that they were hooked for life. And yet in many cases I have seen them kick the habit once and for all. Literally millions and millions of Americans have stopped smoking. You can too. Before

you get tobacco out of your life, the suggestions here to protect and energize your brain aren't going to do you much good. First things first. Get rid of the tobacco.

2. Guard Your Heart

When you take care of your heart, you brain benefits, too. The 60,000 miles (!) of circulatory system in your body carries oxygen and nutrients to every cell you have. About 80% of that system is made up of the tiniest vessels called capillaries. For your brain to function at maximum efficiency, those vessels have to be healthy.

Unfortunately, as a nation, we're not doing very well. Sixty million Americans have high blood pressure. Of those, only one out of four have it under control. What's more, eleven million that have the disease don't know even know it. And when it comes to physical activity, we're doing even worse. Less than a fourth of Americans meet even minimum exercise guidelines. In the early 1980's, just a fourth of us were considered overweight. Today 70% of us weigh too much.

Blood pressure, activity, and your weight all contribute to how well the vessels of your brain function.

3. Control Your Blood Pressure

Your doctor refers to it as "hypertension"

but it has very little to do with being tense. You can't really tell if you have high blood pressure just by how you feel. Officially, if your blood pressure is 120/80 or higher you have high blood pressure. But today the goal is to prevent, not just treat. So even if your blood pressure is just a little over 120/80 we aggressively try to bring that number down as well. Your target is to get your top number below 120 and your bottom number below 80. We no longer tolerate "just a little" high blood pressure. The brain and its blood vessels are very susceptible to pressures that are too high.



People who have high blood pressure in their 50's are at a much higher risk of dementia as they get older.

A study published in the journal *Neurology* found that those women who had high blood pressure in their 40s had a 73% increased risk of developing dementia compared to those women who had normal blood pressure.

Of course, higher blood pressure can lead to an increased risk of strokes. Even a “silent stroke” that doesn’t have any outward symptoms can still affect your brain’s ability to function. Many researchers believe that it’s these silent mini-strokes that lead to age-related dementia.

4. Get Off The Sofa

You’ve heard it before. Exercise is just plain good for you. It helps you sleep better, temporarily lowers your blood pressure, decreases your anxiety, and makes your insulin work better as well. It helps you think better, too. You also decrease your risk of cardiovascular disease, many types of cancer, and type II diabetes. And the more you do, the more the benefits add up. You end up living longer. And you end up living healthier.

There’s now lots of research that shows that a lifetime of regular exercise can help your brain stay healthy.



We know that even simple daily walking can keep the brain sharp and improve memory.

Surprisingly, you still get benefit from physical activity even if you start when you’re older. A study done at the University of Illinois looked at two groups of older adults for six months. One group did stretching and toning exercises, the other group walked briskly three times a week. At the end of the six-month trial only the walker’s cognitive abilities increased.

Exercising for periods longer than 30 minutes seems to be better for brain health than shorter sessions.

Of course, staying physically active helps you age better. We’ve known that for a long time. You maintain a stronger

heart and stronger muscles. You’re more flexible, and you’re less likely to fall. As we get older, the region of your brain involved in memory, called the hippocampus, tends to shrink in size which leads to memory loss. Research now shows that exercise can actually reverse this process.

Your goal is 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic exercise like a brisk walk or 75 minutes per week of a more intense exercise like jogging or using an exercise bicycle. More is even better. Come on, you can find 75 minutes a week! Weight training exercises may also increase the levels of growth factors in the brain. So be sure to include some type of weight resistive exercise at least twice a week. And stretch after, not before, your workout. You’ll get more benefit when your muscles are warmer.

5. Waist Reduction

Being obese in your middle-age years increases your risk of developing dementia as you get older. A study done in Finland that looked at 2000 subjects found that middle-aged people having a body mass index (BMI) of more than 30, and that’s a lot of us right there, had a 3½ times greater chance of developing Alzheimer’s and dementia than those who were normal weight in middle-age. A 3½ times greater rate!

And you don’t have to be officially obese either. The brain appears to shrink and age faster in people who are just “overweight” too.

In one study it was found that those people who were not obese, but simply overweight, that is they had a body mass index of 25 to 30, had 4% less brain tissue compared to those at normal weight. The overweight people also had brains that looked eight years older than the brains of normal weight people. Beyond that, in those who were obese, with a BMI of over 30, their brains looked 16 years older and had 8% less tissue compared to those who were normal weight. That loss of brain tissue puts you at a higher risk for

Alzheimer’s and dementia.

Some good news. Weight loss has been associated with an improvement in activity in the memory-related areas of the brain. Most of those studies have been done on those in their sixties or younger. So don’t wait too long!

6. Stop Playing Games

Lumos Labs, the brain-game company that makes *Luminosity* was fined \$50 million dollars by the government for making false claims about the brain health benefits of their product. And yet, they’re still selling it today.

Frankly, there is little evidence that sudoku, crossword puzzles, or computer training will keep your brain healthy. They don’t help brain function, memory, or delay dementia. What do you need to know? Brain games only help you get better at playing brain games.

What does work? A lifetime of learning. Many studies have found a lower risk of dementia in people with more education.



Learning a new language or how to play a musical instrument can actually help your mind stay sharp, too.

Those in professional or managerial jobs, who read more, and are more involved in mentally stimulating activities also seem to be less susceptible to dementia.

So the lesson is to stay mentally active. That, in and of itself, won’t necessarily protect you from Alzheimer’s, but

it may give some protection against the dementia symptoms of the disease. Autopsy findings have shown some people who remained mentally sharp while alive actually had brains with advanced Alzheimer's disease. Researchers believe that ongoing learning and engagement in life allow these people to build up a "cognitive reserve" of neurological networks that compensated for those areas that were affected by disease.

Here's a word to the wise. Please don't think that doing sudoku or playing solitaire is going to make up for a lifestyle that includes obesity, inactivity, and not taking your blood pressure medicine. What you need to do is take a class at the local community college, sign up for piano lessons, and learn to speak Italian.

7. Eat Well

So what about nutrition? Some recent research reviews say that there's no solid evidence yet that what you eat can help prevent age-related dementia or Alzheimer's. Nevertheless, as you've already learned, a healthy diet that helps minimize vascular disease in the brain should, indeed, decrease your risk of dementia. Here's what some research has found about the impact of nutrition on your brain.

A study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* found that people that ate a diet consisting of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fish, nuts, and olive oil had about a 35% lower risk of

cognitive impairment compared to those who didn't eat that way.



Researchers at Harvard Medical School found that women who ate at least eight servings a week of green leafy vegetables had a brain function of someone about two years younger than women who only ate three or less servings of vegetables a week.

The researchers think that the antioxidants found in vegetables helped retain brain function as the women got older.

Your brain will also benefit if you don't overeat. Researchers at Mayo Clinic looked at the calorie intake of people and found that those suffering from mild cognitive impairment were those that also consumed the most calories every day. That may be one more reason that intermittent fasting that controls your intake of calories seems to make you more mentally sharp.

Over the past several years, many studies are suggesting a link between a poor quality diet and depression and anxiety.

One study found a direct relationship between fast food and depression. The more fast food consumed, the greater the chance of suffering from depression. It appears that inflammation contributes to depression. Poor quality diets contribute to inflammation.

While total fat intake has not been shown to have an impact on cognitive health, many studies are showing that a diet that is higher in poly and monounsaturated fats like fish and olive oil, respectively, does seem to be protective. Decreasing saturated animal fats is also important.

You should be able to maximize your brain capabilities by eating a diet that limits red meat, butter and stick margarine, sugars, pastries, sweets, fast foods and fried foods, and cheese. You want to emphasize whole grains, leafy greens, beans, berries, chicken, fish, and olive oil. Research done at Rush University following about 1000 elderly adults found that those who followed this diet had brains that functioned as if they were about 7½ years younger than people who did not.

Here's The Bottom Line

There are 90-year-olds out there that are more mentally sharp than some 50-year-olds. And there are 50-year-olds whose brains function better than their 30-year-old co-workers. A lot of that is because of the lifestyles they live. So put down the crossword puzzle, cook a good meal, go take a walk, and do something good for your brain.



For over twenty-five years, health promotion expert David Mainz, MS, RDN, FAND, CSP has been helping audiences enhance both their personal and professional productivity.

As an award-winning international speaker, author, and frequent radio and television guest, he presents his inspirational and content-rich programs to groups worldwide.

Contact David at www.DavidMeinz.com