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Can mental training games help prevent Alzheimer's?

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Loss of thinking power is a fear shared by many aging baby boomers. That fear has resulted in a budding industry for brain training products - exercises such as Brain Age, Mindfit and My Brain Trainer - which in 2007 generated $80 million in the United States alone.

The premise of brain training is simple: participants must complete a series of daily exercises such as mental calculation, memorization and enigmas to help increase cognitive ability and avoid certain neurodegenerative diseases. Some companies like Brain Center International, which produces NeuroActive, promise regular users they'll shave 10 years of brain aging after eight weeks of use. Is it surprising some 10,000 copies of the product were sold in Quebec in the last six months?

"To my knowledge, there is no scientific research demonstrating results from such recreational programs," says Sylvie Belleville, a professor at the Université de Montréal' Department of Psychology and associate research director of the Institut universitaire de gériatrie de Montréal.

According to Belleville, the principles of intellectual stimulation aren't false, but their efficiency haven't been scientifically proven. She argues that Sudoku and crosswords could work just as well.

Yet there are programs that exist that have been proven to benefit seniors and Alzheimer's victims, according to Belleville: "These programs are based on memory strategies. They have nothing to do with

the repetitive exercises offered by NeuroActive and others," she says.

While memory products can be helpful, Belleville warns against the unrealistic expectations some may provide. The advertising of these products, she stresses, "Could give false hopes. If someone doesn't see a change they could quit and it could eventually lead to depression."

In her opinion, the best way to keep one's cerebral functions is to do intellectual activities, eat well, control vascular factors, particularly in the case of diabetes and hypertension, and remain physically active.

Source: University of Montreal

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