

Memory training not best bet for reducing 'senior moments'

January 19 2011, By Becky Ham



Trying to stave off senior moments with memory drills and similar brain-boosting activities? A new evidence review suggests that these specific training regimes are not any better than simple conversations at improving memory in older adults.

Some studies show that healthy [older adults](#), and those with mild cognitive impairment, do remember words better after some [memory training](#). However, seniors with memory training do not improve their memory any more than do seniors who participate in a discussion about art, for instance, instead of drilling with a list of words.

“Based on published studies, it seems that alternative interventions do just as well as cognitive interventions,” said Mike Martin, a psychologist

at the University of Zurich and review co-author.

The findings do “not mean that longer, more intense or different interventions might not be effective,” said Martin, “but that those which have been reported thus far have only limited effect.”

The review appears in the latest issue of *The Cochrane Library*, a publication of the Cochrane Collaboration, an international organization that evaluates medical research. Systematic reviews draw evidence-based conclusions about medical practice after considering both the content and quality of existing medical trials on a topic.

“Most people, although not all, experience a cognitive decline in old age,” Martin said. The decline for adults over age 60 can include memory loss and inability to plan, pay close attention or perform tasks as quickly as before.

The normal rate of decline seems to accelerate in some people, leading to a condition called [mild cognitive impairment](#) that some researchers see as a risk factor for developing dementia later in life.

Although several studies have suggested that brain-training exercises could delay or reverse signs of cognitive decline, the studies and the types of training “vary considerably,” Martin said.

“We need...better coordinated studies to ultimately determine if and which types of training may prevent cognitive decline in old age,” he said.

Other researchers are exploring another type of training to keep the [brain](#) fit: physical activity, from aerobics to balance exercises. For instance, in small studies led by Teresa Liu-Ambrose, Ph.D., of the University of British Columbia, resistance training for older women was

associated with improved mental focus. “This has important clinical implications because [cognitive impairment](#) is a major health problem that currently lacks a clearly effective pharmaceutical therapy,” Liu-Ambrose said.

The Cochrane researchers reviewed the evidence for cognitive training from 36 studies, conducted between 1970 and 2007, which included 2229 patients. Most of the studies involved group sessions, where a trainer or tutor offered the cognition exercises. The total time in training sessions varied across from six to 135 hours, with the training sessions carried out over periods ranging from one day to two years.

More information: Martin M et al. Cognition-based interventions for healthy older people and people with mild cognitive impairment. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2011, Issue 1.

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