

Mental, physical challenges may help seniors stay sharp, study says

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Small steps, including stretching, watching educational DVDs, reaped rewards.

(HealthDay)—A little exercise and some mental stimulation may go a long way toward helping seniors stay sharp, a new, small study suggests.

Researchers found the memory and thinking skills of 126 inactive [older adults](#) improved after they were assigned daily activities designed to engage their brains and their bodies.

"The good news is that one plus one equals three," said Dr. Richard Isaacson, director of the Alzheimer's division at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, who was not involved in the study.

The take-home point is that making small changes in physical and mental activity has led to positive changes in memory and thinking skills,

Isaacson said.

Learning a few extra words in a [foreign language](#) and walking several times a week, for example, will pay off in a few months, he noted.

"You don't have to run a marathon to be fit, and you don't have to become fluent in a foreign language to remain sharp as you age," he said.

For the study, published online April 1 in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, Deborah Barnes, from the University of California, San Francisco, and colleagues divided the participants, who were 65 or older (average age 73), into four groups. Three days a week for three months, all engaged in some type of [mental stimulation](#) one hour daily and some physical activity for an hour daily.

More rigorous options included intensive brain-training computer games and dance-based aerobics. Other participants, who were followed as "controls," watched educational DVDs on arts, history and science, or participated in a stretching and toning class.

All [study participants](#) said their memory or thinking skills had declined before the study began, but all showed improvements in memory and [thinking skills](#) at the end of the study period, no matter what activities they performed, the study showed.

Dr. Sam Gandy, associate director of the Mt. Sinai Alzheimer's Disease Research Center in New York City, wasn't surprised by the findings.

"Maintaining both an active physical lifestyle and an active mental lifestyle has been shown to have cognitive [mental] benefits that may include delaying or preventing Alzheimer's disease," Gandy said.

Rates of Alzheimer's, an age-related brain disorder, are expected to soar

in the next 40 years because people are living longer, and the "baby boom" generation is entering old age.

While the study doesn't directly prove that the increased physical and mental activity together boosted brain function, the trial builds on earlier research linking the two, experts say.

Previous studies have shown that three 30-minute sessions several times a week of brisk walking or weight training has measurable benefits on thinking and memory, Gandy said. "It is now possible to reduce physical exercise to a prescription, just like a pill," he said.

It's not always as straightforward to prescribe mental activities given that different people are drawn to different activities, but that needn't be a deterrent, he noted.

"The new study suggests that the engagement, per se, is probably more important in causing the protective effect, and that the nature of the particular engaging activity is less important," Gandy said.

Whether doing crossword puzzles, learning to play the piano or taking up a foreign language, find something you enjoy and do it regularly, he suggested.

"We have at hand right now the means to sustain cognitive function and delay Alzheimer's by adopting a routine of physical and mental activities available to everyone, everywhere, at no cost," Gandy said.

Because most of the study participants were highly educated, it's possible that the findings aren't applicable to all older adults, the authors acknowledged.

More information: Learn more about how to [protect brain health](#) at

the Alzheimer's Association.

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