

Can games, puzzles keep aging minds sharp?

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New study says maybe, but the reason why isn't yet clear.

(HealthDay)—Older adults who enjoy mentally stimulating games may have bigger brains and sharper thinking skills than their peers, new research suggests.

The study looked at the connection between playing games such as puzzles, crosswords, cards and checkers and mental acuity for adults in their 50s and 60s.

Researchers found that people who played those games at least every other day performed better on tests of memory and other mental functions. And, based on MRI scans, they had greater tissue mass in brain areas involved in memory.

However, the chicken-or-egg question remains, said lead researcher Stephanie Schultz.

"The cause-and-effect here is unclear," said Schultz, a research specialist

at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Dean Hartley, director of science initiatives for the Alzheimer's Association, agreed. "We don't know whether crosswords and puzzles will stave off dementia," he noted.

But, he said, the results fit in with a body of research suggesting that mental "exercise" might help delay the onset of dementia in some people.

Alzheimer's is marked by the buildup of abnormal protein deposits in the brain known as plaques and tangles. But researchers know that some people are able to keep up their day-to-day functioning despite those brain changes.

One theory, Hartley explained, is that people who are more educated, or engage in mentally stimulating activities, have a bigger "cognitive reserve" to draw upon when Alzheimer's-related [brain changes](#) begin.

If mental exercise is beneficial, is there something special about games—as opposed to reading a good book? Hartley said it's possible: Games not only stimulate the mind, but can keep older adults socially active as well, he noted.

Schultz agreed. "Our findings suggest that cognitively stimulating activities—games, in particular—may be beneficial," she said. "Whether that's due to the cognitive stimulation or the social aspect, or both, is a good question."

The findings are based on 329 older adults who were free of dementia, but at increased risk of Alzheimer's. Three quarters of the study volunteers had a strong family history of Alzheimer's disease. Forty percent had a gene that's linked to the disease.

On average, the researchers found, study participants who said they played games at least every other day performed better on standard tests of memory and other mental abilities, compared to those who played games less often.

Schultz said future research should try to weed out whether certain games seem more promising than others—and then put them to test. That means designing trials where [older adults](#) would actually be randomly assigned to take up mentally stimulating activities or not.

Hartley agreed that studies like those would be useful. But for now, he said, people can think of mental exercise as one part of a healthy lifestyle that might affect their dementia risk later.

He suggested people eat a healthy diet, get physical as well as mental exercise, and talk to their doctors about managing [cardiovascular risk factors](#) like [high blood pressure](#) and cholesterol.

"It's about how you manage your whole life," Hartley said.

Schultz was scheduled to present the findings Monday at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. Because the findings are being presented at a meeting, rather than published in a peer-reviewed journal, they should be viewed as preliminary.

More information: The Alzheimer's Association has more on [cutting dementia risk](#).

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