

A healthy body often equals a healthy brain

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Experts stress that exercise, good diet help maintain memory as much as mental challenges do.

(HealthDay)—People who want to stay sharp as they age often turn to brain teasers, puzzles and games, figuring correctly that they'll lose it if they don't use it.

But a healthy body is also key to maintaining a healthy brain, and that's something many people tend to overlook, experts say.

"We're just now starting to get people to recognize that eating right and exercising and maintaining your health can play into the graceful aging of your brain," said Dr. Mary Ann Bauman, an Oklahoma City physician and chair of the American Stroke Association advisory committee.

Healthy living tips make up more than half of the "10 Ways to Love

Your Brain" recently released by the Alzheimer's Association, as part of June's Alzheimer's & Brain Awareness Month.

An estimated 47 million people worldwide are living with [dementia](#) in 2015, and this number is projected to triple by 2050, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Medical science cannot stop the progression of either dementia or Alzheimer's disease, but everyone can take steps to maintain their ability to think, problem solve and remember as they grow older, said Heather Snyder, director of medical and scientific operations for the Alzheimer's Association.

"There's no one specific thing that if you do this, you will reduce your risk," Snyder said. "It's really a balance of these top 10 ways to love your brain. By doing all these things in balance, you're going to age as healthfully as you can."

Maintaining the health of your heart and your circulatory system appears to be a key factor in protecting your mental capabilities, Bauman said.

Researchers now believe that micro-strokes—tiny decreases in blood flow to the brain—can add up and, over time, cause a person to suffer a loss of their faculties, she said.

By keeping the brain both healthy and active, a person can preserve what's called their "brain reserve"—the ability of the brain to weather various insults, including aging, said Dr. Norman Relkin, a neurologist at Cornell University's Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City and a board member of the American Federation of Aging Research.

"The more brain reserve a person brings to the table, the older they can get without showing signs and symptoms of memory loss," Relkin said.

The Alzheimer's Association tip sheet urges everyone to:

- **Engage in regular physical activity.** A number of studies have linked exercise to reduced risk of brain decline, Bauman said.
- **Quit smoking.** Smoking increases risk of brain decline, and quitting can reduce a smoker's risk down to levels comparable to people who have never smoked, the association says.
- **Treat conditions that can affect heart health.** Chronic problems like obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes take a toll on your brain as well as your heart, Bauman said.
- **Get enough sleep.** Studies have linked sleeplessness with problems in memory and thinking, the association says.
- **Maintain your mental health.** Depression, anxiety and stress can speed a person's brain aging, if they are left untreated. "We know that stress hormones, when produced in excess, causes the brain to shrink more rapidly," Relkin said.
- **Protect your head.** Brain injuries as mild as a concussion can increase risk of brain decline and dementia. Wear a seat belt, use a helmet when on a bike or playing contact sports, and try to avoid falling down.
- **Eat a healthy low-fat diet that's rich in fruits and vegetables.** A good diet can help address nearly all chronic illnesses, and therefore will ultimately help your brain, Relkin said. "Diet clearly impacts not only our risk of developing cognitive [brain] disturbances, but also affects our longevity," he said. "I think we're going to see more and more in terms of dietary interventions that are going to impact the aging process."

The remaining tips offered by the Alzheimer's Association focus on keeping your brain busy and active, which also can help by forcing the brain to preserve and build up its neural connections, Relkin said.

These brain-centered tips from the Alzheimer's Association include:

- **Keep learning.** Continuing education can help reduce risk of brain decline and dementia.
- **Remain social.** People who have an active social life have been shown to have more active and healthy brains, Relkin said.
- **Challenge your brain.** Do something that requires thought, whether that is solving a puzzle, creating a piece of art, building something for your home, or playing a game that forces you to think strategically.

"All these pieces of advice seem to bear out in the reduction of the development of dementia," Relkin said. "We have a lot of knowledge about ways to prevent the deterioration of the brain due to aging, and they all appear to be beneficial in terms of preserving the health of the [brain](#)."

More information: Visit the [U.S. National Institutes of Health](#) for more on brain health.

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