

Don't just fear memory loss: Take action now to keep your brain sharp

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Do you forget what you walked into the bedroom to get?

One of the most common fears people have as they grow older is losing

their memory. Keeping your brain healthy and your memory sharp is about more than doing puzzles or remembering what you needed in a room.

In South Florida, experts are using new approaches to fight off [memory loss](#). Rather than Sudoku and crossword puzzles, their approaches to a mental workout or "[brain fitness](#)" involve everything from building physical muscle to meditation to following a recipe. And they recommend starting brain fitness well before the senior years.

"It's important to start practicing whole brain fitness now because the process of cognitive changes can start 20 years before symptoms present," gerontologist Beverly Sanborn said.

Sanborn says a full mental workout includes six categories of brain fitness: [critical thinking](#), [body movement](#), step-by-step sequencing, learning something new, devising analytics solutions, and doing regular long-term memory exercises.

For example, with critical thinking, you debate a topic from the opposite viewpoint with which you agree. With body movement, you use your mind and body simultaneously to learn the movement. With learning, you look up a new vocabulary word and use it for a week, or substitute new words for cliches you use regularly. With sequencing, you follow a recipe or instructions for building that require steps and measuring. With long-term memory exercises, you take quizzes or tests that require you recall information you learned in the past.

"You want to stimulate your brain in such a way that you challenge the brain to do more than it normally would," said Sanborn, who is incorporating whole brain fitness activities into programming for Belmont Village, a senior living community that will open in Fort Lauderdale in early 2020. You want to exercise regularly, too, she said.

"Every year there is more and more research that shows exercise is essential to maintaining your mental fitness."

Only a small number of people—5% - get Alzheimer's disease before age 65. Still, with more than 5.8 million Americans of all ages living with Alzheimer's disease, researchers hope to learn more about the onset, causes, and progression of the disease. "While people recognize there is not a cure, they have an interest in trying to delay symptoms," Sanborn said.

In Boca Raton, Dr. James Galvin, founder of the Comprehensive Center for Brain Health at Florida Atlantic University, conducts personalized assessments of brain health using 4,000 data points. He looks for risks for memory loss and crafts a plan for the prevention of additional loss. The plan might include actions such as getting started on a brain-healthy diet, giving up smoking or drinking, adding more social activities, or taking on aerobic exercise.

Galvin has discovered there is a window in which brain fitness and interventions work best. "Once you cross that line, we will not be making as big an impact as we could," he said. "If you don't feel as sharp as before, have an evaluation and see if there is something we can do about it."

In Miami, Dr. Marc Agronin operates mind fitness workshops at the new MIND Institute at Miami Jewish Health. At weekly workshops in the MIND gym, people work with a coach to challenge their brains through activities that include computer games, musical activities like "name that tune," origami making and language translation.

"What we are doing is challenging them, and people have different levels of capacity for that," Agronin said about the Meaningful Minds Brain Fitness Program.

At this time, there is virtually no conclusive evidence that vitamin supplements touted as memory boosters can prevent or delay memory lapses. The same is true of medications. So far, the medications for memory loss only delay the worsening of the disease for a period of time. Trials for a variety of new drugs are underway.

"Sometimes people think because there is no cure for memory, there is nothing you can do," Agronin said. "That's absolutely untrue. There are so many things you can do."

3 Strategies To Boost Your Brainpower

- Do a [brain](#) workout. Enhance reasoning, problem-solving and memory abilities by learning a new language, or adding to your vocabulary. Rather than doing crosswords over and over, the key is to do an activity considered a mental stretch.
- Exercise regularly. New research presented for the American Psychological Association found a correlation between physical activity and fewer signs of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. Walking, weightlifting, yoga, tai chi or aerobics may delay or slow memory loss.
- Manage health risks. Lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels dramatically reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke, which are risk factors for [memory](#) loss.

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