



WELLNESS

Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

March 2010

This Month's Topic:

SOUP UP YOUR NODDLE!

Boosting Brain Health

Weighing in at about three pounds, the brain is the most powerful organ in the body. Protected within the skull, the brain works 24/7 to manage our breathing, digestion, movement, and thought. As long as it's working right, most of us don't give the brain a second thought. Yet, just as we need to exercise and eat right to keep our bodies healthy, it's important to keep the brain healthy, too.

How the Brain Works

Entire books have been written on brain function, but here's a quick summary: An adult brain contains about 100 billion nerve cells, most of which are called neurons. Branches from one neuron to the next connect at more than 100 trillion points called synapses.¹ The nerve cells "talk" to each other through a series of tiny electrical charges and bursts of chemicals known as neurotransmitters.

Over time, our experiences create patterns in the way electrical signals travel from neuron to neuron. In a way, these electrical signals regulate everything we do, including our thoughts, feelings and memories. In turn, everything we do helps regulate the connections between our neurons.

Can Your Brain Do Push-ups?

Studies have shown that stimulating the brain can actually increase the number of neurons and neural pathways in the brain.¹ And a healthier, stronger, more flexible brain is more resistant to disease.

Experts agree that reducing stress, thinking positively and stimulating the brain can boost brain health. In fact, scientists at the Institute on Aging have found that people who participate in stimulating activities such as reading, puzzles and games, playing, and listening to music are at a lower risk for developing Alzheimer's disease.²

So, what's the best way to stimulate the brain and make it healthier? The answer is different for each person, but learning something new seems to be a good place to start. What you learn isn't

important: it could be a language, a musical instrument, or how to do Sudoku puzzles. The important thing is to keep creating new connections in the brain.

Keep Your Brain Sharp — Exercise!

Good news! You can help keep your brain healthy by exercising. California experts studied 5,925 older women who walked several times a week. They measured the women's brain function at the beginning of the study and again six to eight years later. They found that women with higher levels of physical activity were less likely to develop cognitive decline.³ An Australian study showed that even 20 minutes of daily activity can prevent memory deterioration.⁴

Plan at least 20 minutes of exercise each day — or 2½ hours a week. You don't need to buy expensive equipment or join a gym. A brisk daily walk is a great way to start. Or you could dance, do low-impact exercise with a DVD, or go swimming.

Nine Easy Ways to Give Your Brain a Boost

Nobody develops six-pack abs in just one exercise session, and it's the same with brain health. It's important to develop good habits and stick to them. Following are nine simple ideas for increasing your brain power. And remember, UBH is here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges.

1. **Laugh out loud.** Laughing relaxes your muscles, reduces tension and can even boost your immune system.
2. **Create something.** Pretend you're a kid and learn to paint, make pottery, design stained glass or carve wooden animals. Don't worry about the results — just enjoy the process.
3. **Learn something new.** Whether you're learning to play the cello or taking Italian classes, you're building new connections in your brain — and building community, too!
4. **Feed your head.** New ideas are like a healthy meal for your brain, so get up and get going. Visit a museum. Take in a movie or concert. Explore a new town or discover something new about your own.
5. **Solve a puzzle.** Some people like crosswords and word jumbles, while others love to solve a Sudoku puzzle. Working your way through a puzzle is like asking your brain to do push-ups. And that's a good thing.
6. **Read and discuss.** There's nothing like a good book, and a book club can be a great way to expand the experience while making new friends. Your local library or community center can point you in the right direction.
7. **Get involved.** Play a sport, join a yoga class, volunteer in a soup kitchen or your local school. There are plenty of ways to match your skills to someone's needs.
8. **Don't forget to breathe.** Inhale deeply through your nose to the count of eight, and out through your mouth to the count of 16. You'll feel tension begin to melt away.
9. **Recharge your batteries.** For brain health, you need to be rested. Don't forget the power of a good night's sleep.

Resources:

Use the search phrase “mental fitness” for tips on how to keep mentally fit as we age.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): United Behavioral Health (UBH)

Toll-free number: 1-866-248-4105 (7 days/24 hours), Access code: 61570,
www.liveandworkwell.com

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¹ Alzheimer's Association. Alzheimer's Association Brain Tour. Available at www.alz.org/brain.

² National Institute on Aging, Alzheimer's Disease Education & Referral Center. The Search for AD Prevention Strategies. July 2005.

³ Yaffe, Kristine, MD, et. al. A Prospective Study of Physical Activity and Cognitive Decline in Elderly Women: Women Who Walk. Archives of Internal Medicine, 2001; 161: 1703-1708.

⁴ Lautenschlager, N.T. et al. Effect of Physical Activity on Cognitive Function in Older Adults at Risk for Alzheimer's Disease: A Randomized Trial. Journal of the American Medical Association, 300(9), 1027-1037, 2008.