

Keep Your Brain Fit!

Maria walks two miles every day, then heads off to a class at the local college. Sam swims laps at the fitness club three times a week and studies a foreign language online in the comfort of his own home. During Charles' daily ritual of reading the morning paper, he reads several paragraphs upside down. He also works out in his small home gym.

What do all these seniors have in common?

They're concerned about maintaining their mental capabilities and keeping their brain circuitry in good working order. At the same time, they're maintaining their physical health.

Most of us are aware that good health practices can make a difference in our general health and longevity. Research over the years has shown that eating right, maintaining appropriate weight, exercising regularly, and avoiding tobacco can enhance our physical fitness. Spending time with family and friends, reducing stress, and seeing the doctor regularly also add to one's sense of well-being.

Did you know that your exercise routine can also boost your brain health?

Researchers at the University of Illinois found a significant relationship between physical activity and maintenance of brain function as we age. One finding was that persons over age 65 were less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease if they exercised up to 30 minutes three times a week. The same researchers found better performance on cognitive tests and higher levels of cerebral blood flow in those over-62-year-olds who exercised or continued working as compared to less active retirees. The idea that the brain automatically deteriorates as we get older is not accurate. Instead, under the influence of exercise, certain parts of the brain appear to be able to take over the function of other parts.

Do some mental exercises also.

It's not just physical exercise that keeps the brain going strong. Some studies suggest that mental exercises such as reading, crossword and jigsaw puzzles, and solving numbers problems may have a protective effect.

But it might take more than that.

Dr. Lawrence Katz, Professor of Neurobiology at Duke University Medical School, and co-author of the book, *Keep Your Brain Alive*, thinks we should really challenge the brain by doing exercises called 'neurobics'. Because we have a tendency to do things the same way, some brain pathways are under-used, but if we use one or more senses differently, or do a routine

activity in an out-of-the-ordinary way, we promote new connections in the brain. Some of these ‘neurobics’ include:

- Use your nondominant hand to brush your teeth, comb your hair, or get dressed.
- Read a paragraph of the newspaper upside down.
- Learn to read Braille or learn another language.
- Memorize your grocery list instead of depending on a written one.
- Drive a different route to work or the mall.
- Take a whiff of a particular aroma—cinnamon, sage, cloves—whenever you dial a certain phone number. It might help you remember that number.

For more information on brain exercises, check these resources:

- Lawrence Katz and Manning Rubin. *Keep Your Brain Alive*. New York: Workman Publishing Co., 1999
- www.aarp.org/bulletin/yourhealth/mind_aerobics.html. *Mind Aerobics: Ten Ways to Get Your Memory in Shape*
- www.fairview.org/healthlibrary/content/print_sha_mindaler_sha.htm, *Keeping Your Mind Alert*

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