

Boost Your Brainpower

By Michael Castleman

You forgot your mother's birthday. You can never remember where you parked in the mall parking lot. And what was the name of that movie you saw last weekend? Don't worry, little memory lapses are normal at any age. Still, if you'd like to sharpen your mental faculties, research shows you can boost your brainpower and fend off age-related cognitive decline with four simple brain-building strategies:

1. **Get your body in gear** To a large extent, mental sharpness depends on the amount of blood that flows through the brain. Exercise improves blood flow, which in turn helps keep your mind sharp.

In a recent study, researchers at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco surveyed the physical activity of 2,736 elderly women then tested their cognitive function. As their physical activity increased, so did their mental acuity, reports study leader Deborah E. Barnes, Ph.D. What's more, the participants did not join gyms or run marathons. Their main activity was walking.

Australian researchers came to the same conclusion after comparing two groups of people: one sedentary and one just a little more active. Not surprisingly, the slightly more active group had better cognitive function. What's more, the exercise-related brain boost was achieved by adding just 20 minutes extra of walking a day, notes researcher Nicola T. Lautenschlager, M.D.

2. **Eat like a Mediterranean** This means less meat and cheese, more fruits and vegetables. Why? The animal fats and cholesterol in meats and cheese clog the arteries, limiting blood flow through the brain and body, while the nutrients in fruits and vegetables improve the function of your arteries and help keep blood flowing freely, explains Nikolaos Scarmeas, M.D., assistant professor of neurology at Columbia University in New York.

Scarmeas recently surveyed the diets and tested the mental function of 1,875 adults then followed them for four and a half years. Compared with those who ate a typical American diet (lots of meat and cheese and fewer than five servings of fruits and vegetables a day), the ones who ate the least meat and cheese and the most fruits and vegetables had 28 percent less risk of developing cognitive impairment. In addition, a Mediterranean diet was found to help prevent further mental decline in the 482 people who already had some mild impairment when the study began. Compared with those who ate a typical cheeseburger-and-fries American diet, "those who ate a Mediterranean diet were 45 percent less likely to progress from mild cognitive impairment to Alzheimer's disease," says Scarmeas.

3. **Don't smoke** The reason smoking is a key risk factor for heart disease is because it accelerates narrowing of the arteries, which in turn reduces blood flow through the heart. It should come as no surprise then, that smoking has the same effect on the brain.

When Dutch researchers tested 1,964 adults, ages 43 to 70, they found that the smokers had substantially poorer mental function than those who had never smoked. In fact, as the number of cigarettes smoked increased, brainpower decreased. Many other studies agree. Bottom line: "Giving up smoking at any age helps prevent cognitive decline," concludes study author W. M. Monique Verschuren, Ph.D., of the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environment.

4. **Challenge your brain** It appears the old adage "use it or lose it" applies to the brain as well.

Several studies have shown that challenging your brain with things like crossword puzzles, Sudoku and Scrabble helps keep your mind sharp. Now add Google to the list.

After scanning the brains of 24 older adults, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that those who had extensive experience using Internet search engines had much higher levels of brain activity than those who rarely searched the Web. "Simple, everyday computer tasks, like [Internet] searching, activate neural circuits and strengthen the brain," concludes study leader Gary W. Small, M.D., director of the UCLA Center on Aging.

For years, experts have harped about the physical benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables,

exercising regularly and not smoking. Now they're finding that what's good for the body is also good for the brain. It's the ultimate two-for-one deal! Add some intellectual puzzles, search the Internet, and you may never forget your mother's birthday again.

Michael Castleman has been called "one of the nation's leading health writers" (Library Journal). He is the author of 11 consumer health books and more than 1,500 health articles for magazines and the Web.

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