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## Healthy mind and older people

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### Summary

- Keeping physically fit, eating a healthy diet and doing regular mental exercises may help maintain your brain's functions, including memory.
  - Prescription medications or disease can contribute to a marked decline in mental abilities.
  - A brain that gets smaller and lighter with age can still function as effectively as a younger brain.
  - Memory loss may be improved by doing mental exercises. Reading newspapers, magazines and books; playing 'thinking' games like Scrabble, cards and Trivial Pursuit; doing crossword puzzles and word games; studying a topic that interests you; learning a language; or learning something you've never learnt before may all help exercise your brain.
  - Conditions and events more common to older age that affect brain function include atherosclerosis (narrowed arteries), dementia (such as Alzheimer's disease), Parkinson's disease and stroke.
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Growing older does not mean that you will automatically lose your memory or other thinking skills. There's a lot you can do to keep your mind healthy. Regular physical activity, a healthy diet and mental exercises may help keep your brain and memory working.

Prescription medications or disease can contribute to a marked decline in mental abilities. Older people are more likely to take medications for chronic conditions than younger people. In some cases, a drug (or a combination of drugs) can affect your mental abilities.

Certain diseases that are more common with ageing, such as Alzheimer's disease, can also be the underlying cause of loss of brain function. Check with your doctor to make sure cognitive changes, such as memory loss, are not a side effect of medication or associated with an infection or illness.

### Brain changes with ageing

Normal changes to the brain that happen as a person gets older include:

- fat and other deposits building up inside brain cells (neurons), which limits their functioning
- neurons that die from 'old age' not being replaced
- loss of neurons meaning the brain gets smaller with age
- messages between neurons being sent at a slower speed.

A brain that gets smaller and lighter with age can still function just as well as a younger brain. For example, exercising an older brain can create new connections between neurons. Mental abilities may be 'shared' by various parts of the brain so as some neurons die, their roles are taken up by others.

### Physical activity is important for a healthy mind

Some conditions that can affect the brain's ability to function, such as stroke, are associated with diet, obesity and sedentary lifestyle choices. Keeping an active body is crucial if you want an active mind.

Regular exercise may improve your brain's memory, reasoning abilities and reaction times.

Some things that may help include:

- Getting at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise every day gives your brain an oxygen boost. This means increasing your heart rate to a level where you can talk but not sing, You don't have to do your 30 minutes of exercise all at once, as exercising in three 10-minute blocks, gives significant health benefits.
  - Avoiding smoking and drinking too much alcohol.
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## **Eat healthy food for a healthy mind**

Good nutrition helps keep your brain in good condition. Some tips for eating well include :

- Make sure your diet contains sufficient nutrition and vitamins.
- Eat a balanced diet and avoid extreme low- carbohydrate diets, as glucose is the brain's only energy source.
- Eat more vegetables and some fruit
- Eat less processed food, especially foods that have a lot of saturated fat (like biscuits, pastries, fast foods), salty foods and drinks, and foods high in sugar.
- Drink enough water for your body size and lifestyle.

## **Improve your mental fitness**

Memory loss can be improved by 30 to 50 per cent simply by doing mental exercises. The brain is like a muscle – if you do not give it regular workouts, it will get weaker.

You may want to try the following:

- Have a social life and engage in plenty of stimulating conversations.
- Read newspapers, magazines and books.
- Play 'thinking' games like Scrabble, cards and Trivial Pursuit.
- Take a course on a subject that interests you.
- Take up a new hobby.
- Learn a language or a dance.
- Do crossword puzzles and word games.
- Play games that challenge the intellect and memory, such as chess.
- Watch 'question and answer' game shows on television, and play along with the contestants.
- Try hobbies such as woodwork, as they can improve the brain's spatial awareness (knowing the location of things in relation to your own body).

Keep stress under control with regular meditation, exercise and relaxation – an excess of stress hormones like cortisol can be harmful to neurons.

You can also keep your memory sharp, by getting regular and adequate sleep.

## **Boost your memory**

Being good at remembering something is a learned skill. Some ways you can improve your memory, no matter what your age, include:

- paying attention to whatever it is you want to remember. For example, if you are busy thinking about something else, you may not notice where you put the house keys.
- using memory triggers such as association or visualisation techniques. For example, link a name you want to remember with a mental picture.
- practising using your memory. For example, try to remember short lists, such as a grocery list. Use memory triggers to help you 'jump' from one item to the next. One type of memory trigger is a walking route that you know well. Mentally attach each item on your list to a landmark along the way. For example, imagine putting the bread at the letterbox, the apples at the next-door neighbour's house and the vegetables at the bus stop. To remember the list, you just have to 'walk' the route in your mind.

## **How your health affects your brain function**

Getting older does not necessarily mean that the brain stops working as well as it once did. However, some conditions more common in older age that affect brain function include:

- atherosclerosis
- dehydration
- dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease

- depression
- diabetes mellitus
- heart disease
- medications – prescribed medicines should be regularly reviewed so that unwanted side effects are avoided, and drugs should be discontinued if they are no longer required
- poor nutrition and vitamin deficiency
- Parkinson’s disease
- stroke.

You might be able to manage the things that affect your brain function by:

- being physically active
- eating healthy food and drinking water
- monitoring conditions such as hypertension, cholesterol and diabetes
- managing your medications.

### Where to get help

- Your local doctor
- **Geriatrician**
- **Neurologist**
- **Alzheimer’s Australia Vic** , call 1800 100 500
- **Carers Victoria**, call 1800 242 636
- **Council on the Ageing Victoria**, call (03) 9654 4443

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