

Four Tips to Maintain Your Brain

When you think about fitness, you probably think about marathons and muscles, but do you ever consider brain fitness? You should! Your brain plays a critical role in every area of your life, from learning, working and playing, to personality, aptitude and memory. While the brain is one of the body's most important organs, it is also one of the most mysterious. There is a lot that science has yet to explain, including why some people can still recall the name of their first-grade teacher at age 100, while others develop the early signs of cognitive decline in their 50s. But emerging research indicates that with a few relatively simple lifestyle choices, you can better maintain your brain health. Here's how.

1. Feed your brain. Already watching your weight and sticking to a heart-healthy diet that is low in bad fats and cholesterol? If so, you are already partway there. Current research indicates that a diet low in saturated fats and cholesterol, rich in good fats like polyunsaturated fats and omega-3 fatty acids, and packed with protective foods with nutrients such as vitamin E and lutein may protect brain cells and promote brain health.

Tips to try:

- Switch out saturated and trans fats for healthier fats like the ones found in olive oil and fatty fish such as salmon or ocean trout.
- Maximize your intake of DHA, the omega-3 fatty acid that makes up 50 percent of the brain and is a must-have to support lifelong brain health. Aim for at least 200 mg of DHA per day to maintain brain health. Find DHA in fatty fish such as salmon and trout, along with fortified foods like juice, milk, eggs, tortillas, yogurt and supplements. Look for foods and beverages that have the *life'sDHA*TM logo to ensure you're getting an algal source of DHA.
- Eat a diet rich in vitamin E. Vitamin E helps support brain health and can be found in milk, butter, eggs, vegetable oils, nuts, whole grains, wheat germ and dark leafy greens like spinach. Vitamin E is also available in a supplement.
- Add lutein to your diet. Lutein is an important natural antioxidant that helps maintain healthy eyes and supports brain health as we age. Dark leafy green vegetables (kale, spinach, collards and turnip greens), egg yolks, peas and corn are super foods when it comes to providing lutein. Lutein is also available in a supplement.
- Aim for nine servings (each about the size of a fist) a day of fresh, washed fruits and vegetables with the skin on to maximize the nutritional punch. Make sure you're eating the colorful ones like red grapes, cranberries, blueberries and tomatoes. These contain powerful polyphenols that help decrease the inflammation that is the enemy of brain health.

2. *Stay Physically Active and Healthy.* Overall physical health is closely linked to brain health, making a healthy body key to a healthy brain. Exercise significantly improves health in many ways, from helping to maintain a healthy weight and keeping cholesterol levels in check, to maintaining good blood flow to the body and brain and encouraging the growth of new brain cells and connections.

Tips to try:

- Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise every day of the week. Exercising is a stress reliever and can even help you feel younger.
- Get approximately seven to eight hours of sleep each day.
- See your doctor regularly and sign up for health insurance if you don't already have a plan.
- Don't use tobacco.
- Maintain a healthy weight and help minimize your risk for diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension.

3. *Stay Mentally Active.* You've heard the saying "use it or lose it" and it's especially true when it comes to your brain. Research indicates the brain is capable of learning and retaining new facts and skills throughout life, especially with frequent intellectual stimulation. Intellectual curiosity, pursuit of education, even games, reading and learning new activities are all fun and easy ways to exercise your mind.

Tips to try:

- Find a brain-stimulating activity you like – reading, crosswords, learning a new language – and engage in it regularly.
- Try carving out a little time to meditate when you feel stress is starting to get the better of you, or even when you don't. Meditation may help to reduce inflammation and stress by soothing the vagus, the part of the brain that controls inflammation and immune response in the body.
- Commit to learning a new word or fact every day and commit to mastering a new skill or subject area every year of your life.

4. *Stay Socially Engaged.* Friends and family are key factors to happiness – and they just might be the key to brain health as well. Research shows regular social activity promotes creation of new brain cells and supports brain repair. In one study, men and women who had the most social interaction within their community had less than half the rate of memory loss as those with the least social engagement. So help your brain by getting involved in activities like visiting with friends and relatives, club activities, socializing at the workplace, etc.

Tips to try:

- Keep working as long as you can and want to.
- Volunteer for a cause that is meaningful to you.
- Make friends and family a priority and spend time with them regularly.
- Join clubs or participate in religious/spiritual activities.