

# 10 Tips for Keeping the Brain Sharp



One piece of excellent news in the past year was that brain health seems to be improving among older Americans. A large national survey from the University of Michigan found that over a 10-year-period ending in 2002, memory loss and thinking problems were down significantly among seniors aged 70 and up, from 12.2 percent to 8.7 percent. That's a change that translates into hundreds of thousands of men and women, though Alzheimer's is still a top concern for millions worldwide.

Researchers aren't sure why the decrease in cognitive impairment is occurring, but they suspect that a better educated and more affluent older generation that is less likely to smoke and more likely to eat better and get regular exercise may be helping to keep the brain young. Here's a roundup of ALZinfo.org Wellness and Prevention stories that may help set the tone for a brain-healthy year.

1. **Stay Mentally Challenged.** Seniors who engage in reading books or newspapers, doing crossword puzzles and word or card games, or who attend adult education classes may be more likely to ward off Alzheimer's as they age. Researchers at Columbia University in New York found that participation in intellectual and social activities among seniors was associated with fewer cases of Alzheimer's disease.
2. **Practice Good Waist Management.** Having a thick middle in the middle years increases the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease, a study of more than 6,500 adults from Northern California found. Belly fat, in particular, may be bad for the brain. Having a large abdomen increased the risk of dementia regardless of whether someone was normal weight, overweight or obese.
3. **Work It.** Another study, from Duke University, found that having a job that challenges the intellect may help to keep the mind sharp into old age. And the more complex the job, the better memory and thinking skills held up after retirement. The jobs that proved most beneficial included careers like law, medicine and journalism. But any tasks that required complex organization, decision-making and multi-tasking boosted brain function late into life.
4. **Stay in School.** Research continues to show that the more years of formal education someone has, the lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease. Most recently, investigators in Italy showed that men and women who had many years of schooling and who went on to work in demanding jobs were much more likely stay mentally alert into old age. Even though their brains had many of the changes typical of Alzheimer's disease, education seemed to protect them against memory loss and problems with thinking.
5. **Maintain an Active Social Life.** Men and women who remained socially connected with friends and family as they aged had sharper memories, a study from the Harvard School of Public Health reported. The findings add to a growing body of evidence that active social engagement is key to keeping the brain fit and lowering the risk of Alzheimer's among the elderly.

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- 6. Walk for the Brain.** Seniors who regularly took walks and engaged in other forms of moderate exercise had a lower risk of developing vascular dementia, a form of memory loss tied to poor blood flow in the brain. Vascular dementia is the second most common form of dementia, after Alzheimer's disease, and affects a large segment of the senior population. Poor blood flow may also aggravate the memory loss and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.
- 7. Keep Cholesterol in Check.** Scientists still aren't sure whether statins, the popular cholesterol-lowering drugs that are prescribed for heart disease, help protect against Alzheimer's disease. But they do know that having high cholesterol, at midlife or in later years, can raise the risk of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. And statin drugs are proven fighters against heart attacks and strokes. To help keep cholesterol in check, eat a heart-healthy diet and exercise regularly, and see your doctor to see if you could benefit from a statin medication.
- 8. Control Blood Pressure.** Getting blood pressure under control, an important step for reducing heart disease and stroke, may also help reduce rates of Alzheimer's as well. And it's never too late. New findings show that for seniors in their 80s and 90s, lowering blood pressure with antihypertensive medications was good for the brain.
- 9. Pass the Fish.** Once again, research showed that eating tuna and other types of oily fish like salmon, mackerel and anchovies may help lower the risk of memory decline and stroke in healthy older adults. Fish that was baked or broiled, but not fried, appeared to benefit the brain.
- 10. Surf the Web.** Finally, searching the Internet may be good the brain. Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that surfing the Web triggers key centers in the brain involved in decision-making and complex reasoning and was better for the brain than reading a book.

**From:** [www.ALZinfo.org](http://www.ALZinfo.org), *The Alzheimer's Information Site*. Reviewed by William J. Netzer, Ph.D., Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation at The Rockefeller University.

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