Talking About Brain Health and Aging: The Basics

Laura Dieter, IPMG RN Consultant
In partnership with The Administration for Community Living
AGING WELL DEPENDS ON YOUR GENES, LIFESTYLE CHOICES, AND ENVIRONMENT.

Even if you’re healthy, changes in memory and learning as you age may include:
- More challenges with multitasking
- Increased difficulty finding words
- Minor decrease in the ability to pay attention

However, at any age, you can still:
- Improve your skills
- Learn new things
- Create new memories
- Improve vocabulary

Protecting your health is important to maintaining your independence.
As a person gets older, changes occur in all parts of the body, including the brain.

- Certain parts of the brain shrink, especially those important to learning and other complex mental activities.
- In certain brain regions, communication between neurons (nerve cells) can be reduced.
- Blood flow in the brain may also decrease.
- Inflammation, which occurs when the body responds to an injury or disease, may increase.
PROTECTING BRAIN HEALTH
GOOD OVERALL HEALTH MAY HELP TO MAINTAIN GOOD BRAIN HEALTH.

Strive for:
- Healthy eating
- Regular exercise
- Keeping your brain active
- Social connections
- Getting enough sleep
GOOD NUTRITION IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF LEADING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE—TODAY, TOMORROW, AND IN THE FUTURE.

Healthy eating tips:

- Eat or drink less sugar, salt, and solid fat
- Make fruits, vegetables, and whole grains a major part of your diet
- Choose lean meats, fish, or poultry
- Choose low- or non-fat dairy
- Control portion sizes
- Drink adequate fluids

A healthy diet may promote brain health now, and in the years to come.
REGULAR EXERCISE

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS YOU CAN DO TO STAY HEALTHY.

Benefits:
- Reduces the risk of diabetes, heart disease, depression, and stroke
- Can help to prevent falls
- May improve connections among brain cells

Tips:
- Talk to a health care provider to see what activities are best for you
- Join programs that teach you to be active safely

Many exercise routines can be modified to fit each individual’s fitness level.
KEEP YOUR BRAIN ACTIVE

Keeping your mind active may help maintain your learning, remembering, and thinking skills.

Activity ideas:

- Read books and magazines
- Play games and do puzzles
- Take a class or join a club

Consider joining a game or book club in your community.
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

PEOPLE WHO TAKE PART IN MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES SAY THEY FEEL HAPPIER, AND IT MAY REDUCE SOME HEALTH RISKS.

“Loneliness acts as a fertilizer for other diseases,” Dr. Cole said. “The biology of loneliness can accelerate the buildup of plaque in arteries, help cancer cells grow and spread, and promote inflammation in the brain leading to Alzheimer’s disease. “

Be social and stay connected by:

- Volunteering or working
- Joining a social club or gathering with friends and family
- Trying programs at local community organizations

Approximately 1 million adults over the age of 60 help care for a grandchild.
BRAIN HEALTH RISKS

POTENTIAL THREATS TO BRAIN HEALTH INCLUDE:

- Accidents
- Alcohol
- Smoking and related risks
- Some medicines, or improper use of medicines
- Certain health conditions
RISK FACTOR: ACCIDENTS

ACCIDENTS CAN HAPPEN AT ANY AGE. AS WE GET OLDER, THE RISK OF FALLS AND OTHER ACCIDENTS THAT CAN CAUSE BRAIN INJURY INCREASES.

Reduce your risk:
- Exercise to improve balance and coordination
- Wear safety belts and helmets
- Take a fall prevention class
- Make sure your home is safe
- Review medicines with a health care provider
- Have your vision checked
- Get enough sleep (7-8 hours per night)

Falls are the leading cause of both fatal and nonfatal injuries for people 65 years of age and older.
CONSUMING ALCOHOL CAN AFFECT THE WAY YOUR BRAIN FUNCTIONS.

Alcoholic beverages may:

- Impair communication among brain cells
- Cause drowsiness, dizziness, fuzzy memory, and slurred speech
- Have long-term impacts on balance, coordination, memory, emotions, and body temperature
- Be dangerous when mixed with certain medicines

Some health conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, can be made worse by the consumption of alcohol.
RISK FACTOR: SMOKING AND RELATED RISKS

SMOKING CAN AFFECT YOUR HEART, LUNGS, AND BRAIN.

Benefits of quitting smoking at any age:

- Lower risk of heart attacks, stroke, and lung disease
- Better blood circulation
- Not exposing others to second-hand smoke

In addition, consider how to limit your exposure to air pollution from fires (including fireplaces and candles), vehicles, or industrial areas because pollution can affect your breathing.
RISK FACTOR: MEDICINES

SOME MEDICINES CAN AFFECT THE WAY YOUR BRAIN FUNCTIONS.

Talk with your health care provider about:
- Prescription and over-the-counter drug interactions
- Memory and brain function side effects
- Whether your medicines can affect sleep

It’s important to understand dosing instructions and potential side effects of the medications you are taking.
RISK FACTOR: HEALTH CONDITIONS

THERE ARE SEVERAL HEALTH CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT BRAIN HEALTH, AND SOME CAN BE MANAGED.

Common conditions:
- Heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Sleep problems

Get regular health screenings and talk to your health care provider about any sleep issues you may have.
HEART DISEASE, STROKE, AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

HEART DISEASE AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE CAN LEAD TO STROKE AND BLOOD VESSEL CHANGES IN YOUR BRAIN.

Reduce your risk:
- Manage cholesterol
- Control blood pressure
- Eat healthily
- Quit smoking
- Limit alcohol
- Limit exposure to air pollution

A well-balanced diet can help manage blood pressure and reduce the risk of stroke.
DIABETES DAMAGES BLOOD VESSELS THROUGHOUT THE BODY, INCLUDING IN THE BRAIN.

This condition may increase risk of:
- Heart attack and stroke
- Memory problems and Alzheimer’s disease

Prevent or control diabetes by:
- Maintaining a nutritious diet
- Managing weight through exercise
- Talking to a health care provider about medicine

Maintaining a healthy body weight may help improve the symptoms related to diabetes.
# SLEEP PROBLEMS

SLEEP-RELATED DIFFICULTIES CAN AFFECT BRAIN HEALTH BY LEADING TO INJURIES, CARDIOVASCULAR ISSUES, AND MEMORY PROBLEMS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common disorders:</th>
<th>What you can do:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sleep apnea</td>
<td>Get 7-8 hours of sleep each night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insomnia</td>
<td>Talk to your health care provider and/or sleep specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcolepsy</td>
<td>Use a device or medicine, if prescribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restless Leg Syndrome</td>
<td>Quit smoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Try relaxation techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Older adults should try to get between 7 and 8 hours of sleep each night.
Dementias generally involve a buildup of harmful proteins in the brain, the death of brain cells, and loss of connections among them.

Known risks:
- Age
- Genes, in some people
- Head injury
- Stroke

While symptoms of dementia can vary greatly, at least two of the following core mental functions must be significantly impaired to be considered dementia:
- Memory
- Communication and language
- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Reasoning and judgment
- Visual perception

Alzheimer's Disease is the most common form of dementia.
WHERE TO START
IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO TAKE IN ALL THE THINGS THAT CAN POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY AFFECT BRAIN HEALTH.

Start with one small step in the right direction:
- Schedule a health screening or physical exam
- Review your medicines with your health care provider
- Add one daily serving of vegetables to your diet
- Start a food, activity, or health journal
- Find your community center’s activity schedule
Resources

- National Institute on Aging: Brain Health Resource

- Administration for Community Living: Brain Health: You Can Make a Difference!
  - [https://acl.gov/node/2886](https://acl.gov/node/2886)

- Brain Injuries: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Community Living (PDF) Brochure

- Indiana Medical Model Waiver Information
  - [https://gotoipmg.com/resources/medical-model-waiver-resources](https://gotoipmg.com/resources/medical-model-waiver-resources)