

Keeping Your Mind Alert

Keeping the mind alert is something everyone would like to do better. In 2001, the National Institutes of Health ran a conference to plan more and better research about what works to keep the mind alert. Their technical term was “cognitive health.” The report called for more research on how people can improve their cognitive health beyond just trying to avoid major diseases.

Memory loss is a common complaint as people get older. Do not assume that problems with memory are a normal part of aging. Many things can contribute to memory problems. These include some medicines, poor vision and hearing, vitamin deficiencies, tiredness, stress, depression, and illness. In addition to treating these problems if you have them, there are things you can do to help improve your mental alertness and memory.

Challenge your mind

Mental activity keeps your mind sharp and your memory strong. If you continue to learn and challenge yourself, your brain continues to grow. Your brain can store and retrieve information more easily. Ways to exercise your mind include:

- Learn to play a musical instrument or to speak a foreign language.
- Play Scrabble or do crossword puzzles.
- Take a senior education class at a local college. Try any topic. It might be about something you used to know a long time ago or something new, like a new country, region, industry, or religion.
- Start a new hobby, such as crafts, painting, or bird-watching.
- Volunteer or find other ways to stay involved with other people.
- Read for enjoyment and to stay informed about what is going on in the world.

Stay physically active

Daily physical activity can help improve blood flow to the brain. Recent research is showing that mild to moderate exercise, done regularly, protects and improves your thinking. It may even help you grow new brain cells. Regular exercise helps you to be more awake and alert. If you exercise regularly, you will probably sleep better, too. Lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep can affect your ability to concentrate and remember.

Eat a healthy diet

- Eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, and low in fat and sodium. Eating healthy doesn't mean giving up all sweets, salt, and snacks. It means eating these foods in moderation. The foods and food ingredients you need to limit include fat, cholesterol, sodium, alcohol, and sugar.
- Drink plenty of fluids every day. Water is essential to the human body. Lack of water leads to dehydration, which can leave you feeling tired, making it hard to concentrate.

- Limit how much alcohol you drink. Too much alcohol can lead to weight gain, liver disease, brain damage, and other disorders. Women should have no more than 1 drink a day. Men under 65 should not have more than 2 drinks a day, and if they are 65 or older, they should not have more than 1 drink a day. A drink equals 12 ounces of regular beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 and 1/2 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits such as whiskey or vodka. These are small amounts – get a shot glass and measure to be sure you do not pour too much.

Manage details

Information comes at you from all directions all the time. There are several steps that you can take to help you manage all of this information and feel more in control.

- Write it down. Keep a diary, use calendars, and make lists.
- Stick to a routine. Store easy-to-lose items in the same place. Complete tasks in the same order.
- Set up cues. For instance, if you have been ironing, put your keys on the ironing board. Then you are more likely to remember to turn off the iron before walking out the door.
- Slow down. Forgetfulness may indicate nothing more than having too much on your mind. Slow down and pay full attention to the task at hand, whatever it may be.
- Relax. Stress and anxiety can interfere with concentration. Relaxation releases muscle tension and calms the mind. Massages, hot baths, and listening to music or relaxation tapes are good ways to relax.

If you or your family members worry about your memory, get a checkup. If memory loss has been a troubling problem, your healthcare provider may be able to see if there is a treatable cause.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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