

## Can I Affect My “Brain-Health?”

### Q: Are their lifestyle decisions that make a brain healthier?

**A:** Yes, and tips for a healthier brain do not require you to radically change your daily life..

A common health concern among older adults is memory loss. According to a recent survey, adults are more than twice as likely to fear losing their mental capacity as losing their physical capacity.

Alzheimer’s disease is among the top 10 leading causes of death. While the mortality rate for heart disease and cancer are falling—the mortality rate for Alzheimer’s continues to rise. By 2050, there may be 16 million Americans with Alzheimer’s, and mild cognitive impairment may affect as many as 25% of the elderly.

In another survey, 9 out of 10 people said they thought they could improve their cognitive fitness. 6 out of 10 said they should have their cognitive functioning checked annually---like a regular physical checkup. 8 in 10 said they take some time nearly every day to engage in activities designed to improve their cognitive health.

So what activities are good for “brain health? Here are some steps you can take:

- **Physical Exercise:** Physical exercise is key to maintaining good blood flow to the brain as well as to encourage new brain cells. It also can reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke and diabetes, and protect against those risk factors for dementias.
- **Eat Brain-Healthy Food:** High cholesterol is thought to contribute to stroke and brain cell damage. A low fat, low cholesterol diet is advisable. There is growing evidence that a diet rich in dark vegetables and fruits, which contain antioxidants, may help protect brain cells. HDL (or “good”) cholesterol may help protect brain cells. Use mono- and polyunsaturated fats, such as olive oil. Try baking or grilling food instead of frying. Your brain needs a balance of nutrients,

including protein and sugar, to function well.

- **Manage your body weight.** One study found that those who were obese in middle age were twice as likely to develop dementia in later life. People with high cholesterol and high blood pressure had six times the risk of dementia.
- **Lead A Social Life:** Social activity makes physical and mental activity more enjoyable, and it can reduce stress levels---which helps maintain healthy connections among brain cells. Leisure activities that combine physical, mental and social activity are the most likely to prevent dementia. Sports, cultural activities, emotional support and close personal relationships together appear to have a protective effect against dementia.
- **Stay Mentally Active:** Engage in mentally stimulating activities, which strengthen brain cells and the connections between them, and may even create new nerve cells. Keeping your brain active seems to increase its vitality and may build its reserves of brain cells and connections. Read, write, attend lectures and plays. Sign up for courses at your local community college. Try gardening. Keep your mind challenged and engaged.

There are some risk factors beyond your control, like genetics and aging. But even people who inherit genes associated with dementia from both parents still may not get the disease. All of the brain-health activities mentioned here work best when done together. A healthy brain lifestyle could delay or prevent the appearance of Alzheimer’s disease.

To learn more about brain health, go to [http://www.alz.org/we can help brain health maintain your brain.asp](http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_brain_health_maintain_your_brain.asp)