



# 10 ways to stay sharp

By Christine Crosbie

**W**e all have memory lapses from time to time. Where did I leave my glasses? When is my nephew's birthday? What's that doctor's phone number? The older we get, the harder it is to remember things. But short-term memory loss isn't necessarily a sign of illness. Some cognitive decline can be reversed if you give your brain a workout, just like you would your body.

Believe it or not, cognitive decline begins in our 20s! In fact, the rate of decline

is pretty steady from adulthood on. But, since we have billions of brain cells, we don't usually notice a change until our 60s or 70s. Until recently, it was believed that the brain didn't grow after childhood, and brain cells simply died as we aged. Now, new theories suggest there are ways we can help the brain renew itself and slow the damage that comes with time. Here are 10 things to do to keep your brain sharp:

## 1 Eat smart to stay smart

There are hundreds of dietary supplements that are marketed as brain enhancers. If they all worked, you wouldn't be reading this article! Some of the best foods to nourish your brain are available at any grocery store. It's just a matter of making the right choices. Start with breakfast: The brain needs a steady supply of glucose to keep running effectively. Skipping breakfast has been proven to reduce performance in students as well as adults. Sugary foods provide a rush of glucose that fades quickly, reducing the ability to concentrate and remember. Foods high in protein and fibre, such as brown beans and whole-wheat toast, release glucose slowly. Antioxidants have been shown to improve cognitive function. Fruit and vegetables that are high in vitamin C and E, as well as beta-carotene, contain anti-oxidants while providing the bonus of fibre and other nutrients that vitamin supplements lack. Look for deep-coloured fruit, like berries, and dark green leafy vegetables. Have a couple of snacks during the day, but stay away from high-fat or sugary junk food.

## 2 Train with a video game

They're not just for kids: video and computer game designers are tapping into the aging demographic and are marketing games that are designed to improve cognitive function and memory in older adults. Nintendo has a game for its hand-held system that calculates "brain age" and tracks players' improvements as they tackle a wide variety of puzzles and activities. Lumosity, an online program designed by scientists from Stanford and McGill universities, offers daily training that improves attention, memory and mental agility. Some online programs are free while others are available by subscription. Look carefully to see if the games are associated with reputable researchers at well-known universities and hospitals. No single brain exercise program is guaranteed to work for everyone.

## 3 Read and renew

Have your parent put down the remote control and pick up a book. Watching TV shifts the mind into neutral, it doesn't challenge the brain as much as a book will. Suggest books about new and unfamiliar topics; biographies, science, travelogues, how-to books or works by foreign authors. Challenging reading will give them new perspectives. Even if your parent isn't planning a trip to China or building a workbench, they'll be stimulating their brain by visualizing the process. They might enjoy reading a new poem each day then contemplating its meaning. Reading it out loud or memorizing it provides extra brain exercise.

## 4 Look forward

Another way of improving memory and cognitive function is to visualize and mentally rehearse upcoming activities. For example, your parent can think about when they will take their medication and the steps involved: getting the pills from the medicine chest, pouring a glass of water, swallowing the pills and putting the containers away again. They can imagine an upcoming visit from family members; who will arrive and what subjects will be discussed. Sometimes it helps to have a story prepared to tell visitors, something that happened recently, or a current affairs topic.

## 5 Turn leisure into learning

Older adults should be encouraged to learn how to do something they've never tried before, like Tai Chi, photography or a foreign language. Playing games with friends and family of all ages has the added bonus of social interaction, another brain-booster. A British researcher found that older adults who played bingo regularly had less memory loss and better hand-eye coordination than those who didn't. Playing Scrabble challenges memory and verbal skills. Art courses such as painting,

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"I took an IQ test and the results were negative."

*Anonymous*



## 10 sources of antioxidants

Spinach  
Kale  
Broccoli  
Carrots  
Blueberries  
Raspberries  
Oranges  
Mangoes  
Nuts  
Dark chocolate

## Brainy facts

- A newborn's brain weighs about 400 grams
- The average brain weighs about 1.4 kilos, or three pounds
- The brain loses five to 10 per cent of its weight between the ages of 20 and 90
- It houses 100 billion neurons
- The brain burns up 20 per cent of a body's energy but makes up only two per cent of its weight
- The brain is approximately 75 per cent water
- 20 per cent of the oxygen pumping around your body is used by the brain.



## 4 health goals

Overall health goals that help keep your mind sharp:

- Lower cholesterol
- Lower high blood pressure
- Control diabetes
- Maintain a healthy body weight

pottery and sculpting help develop hand-brain coordination and can counter stress and anxiety in some people.

### 6 Flex the “mental muscle”

Doing puzzles is an accessible and easy way to give the brain a workout. Crosswords use verbal language skills and memory, tapping into different kinds of knowledge. Sudoku number puzzles require looking ahead and anticipating the effects of each move, which helps improve short-term memory and concentration. Caution: make sure your parent doesn't spend hours alone trying to finish each puzzle, social interaction is crucial to brain health, and so is getting up off the sofa and getting some physical exercise!

### 7 Grow new neurons

Exercise is good for your physical health. New studies are showing it also has the bonus benefit of helping your brain renew itself. Researchers studied groups of older people who took part in aerobic fitness classes three times a week, while others took stretching classes. After six months, the subjects were scanned using M.R.I. Those who had been engaging in aerobic exercises showed growth in several areas of the brain, including the hippocampus, the part that primarily handles memory and cognition.

One study found that those who were on a regular exercise regime had brain volumes typical of people three years younger.

### 8 Make lists, past present and future

Lists can help the memory in two ways: by keeping track of the present, and by looking back into the past. Have your parent keep a notebook handy to write down things they may forget, for example, people's names, to-do lists, or questions for their doctor. Ask them to try to remember without the lists, and consult them only when they have to.

For example, if you go grocery shopping with your parent, have them make a list, shop and check it before you leave the store to see how much they remembered. The other way to use lists is to take a trip

down memory lane and write down places visited, the names of favourite restaurants and pets from the past.

### 9 Shake it up!

Most people like to have regular routines and know what to expect during the day. Occasionally shaking things up a bit can challenge the brain and keep it alert. Here's a fun way: try joining your parent in using your non-dominant hands to do things for a day. Answer the phone, use the computer mouse, eat your dinner or play games with your other hand to exercise the other half of your brain. Take different routes on your walks together (but stick to familiar areas) or start grocery shopping at the last aisle of the store. Take note of how your parent feels when switching things around a bit as they work their spatial memory and sense of direction.

### 10 Be careful with alcohol

Long-term heavy drinking does more than damage the liver; it can lead to brain damage in later years. On the other hand, consuming small amounts of alcohol (up to one drink a day for women, two for men) can be a brain-booster. Studies on red wine show it is high in antioxidants, which prevent cell damage caused by free radicals.

Remember, one drink a day doesn't mean you can “save up” seven drinks for Friday nights!

Aging slows the brain's processing time, so it takes longer to remember things and the attention span may be shorter. But, it doesn't mean that older adults are losing their intelligence. Some abilities, like vocabulary and math skills, tend to hold steady with age. Skills, like playing chess and musical instruments, are also retained. Another bonus is that age brings increased emotional stability, temperaments mellow and we become more attuned to the emotional needs of others. Seniors score higher than young people in tests of life choices, handling conflict and setting priorities. Enjoy these advantages and make brain training a regular part of your parent's routine to stay sharp. ●

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