

How to keep your aging brain fit

By Karen Kansler, R.N.

Special to the Review

At one time or another, we have all forgotten an appointment, a person's name or misplaced our keys. Research shows this type of memory loss can be normal as we age. But if you often forget to go to appointments, have problems with language or judgment or are confused about how everyday items are used, you need to visit your doctor now for a broader conversation about how your brain is functioning.

You may have early signs of mild cognitive impairment (MCI), which can lead to dementia or Alzheimer's disease, the prevalent form. Other medical conditions such as depression or Vitamin B12 deficiency can mimic the symptoms of dementia, which is another reason to consult your medical professional.

For most of us, however, aging well depends on your family history and genes, your environment and your lifestyle. Living healthfully can help protect your memory – it's what I call "brain fitness."

About your brain

In our brain, there are four types of memory systems: episodic, semantic, procedural and working.

Episodic memory involves personal experiences, yesterday's phone conversation or last week's movie. Semantic memory stores and retrieves knowledge and facts. Procedural memory allows us to learn or recall activities with little or no conscious thought, such as riding a bike or driving a car. Working memory governs our ability to pay attention, enabling us to retain needed information, such as restaurant directions or phone numbers.

Normal cognitive memory decline starts around middle age, as brain cells shrink and blood flow decreases. Age-associated memory loss is increased by illness, stress, fatigue, lack of activity or social interactions, or distractions. It can also be threatened by some medications, smoking and excessive use of alcohol. This type of memory loss can make it difficult for us to concentrate on more than one thing, to learn new activities, to remember familiar names and words, and to reminisce.

Protect your memory

There are numerous ways to protect your memory and support your brain health. First, protect yourself from head injuries. Older adults are at higher risk for falls and other accidents. Ask your doctor about exercises to improve your balance and coordination. Contact your local hospital or community center to see if they have a falls prevention class. And remember to stay "stroke smart." Work with your

physician to watch your blood pressure, weight, diet, sleep habits and overall health. Most importantly, keep moving with whatever type of exercise your healthcare provider recommends and you really enjoy. Remember, trying something new such as a dance class adds fitness, novelty and socialization into your life, which are all very important to your brain health and overall well-being as you age.

Start slowly

If you feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start, begin slowly. Pick one task that may help your memory and work up to my "keeping brain fit" reminders (see sidebar). Your first steps could be taking a 10-minute walk, writing down what you do (or want to do) every day in a notebook or calling a friend for lunch. Every minute that you devote is an investment in your brain fitness. You can do it, so let's go!

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Keeping brain fit

Cut out this list and post these daily brain fitness reminders on your refrigerator:

- Learn to relax and breathe slowly.
- Write things down.
- Say words out loud.
- Place commonly lost items in a designated place.
- Learn something new every day.
- Challenge yourself and take reasonable risks.
- Stay involved in social activities with family and friends.
- Get moving every day for 30-45 minutes. Break the time into 10-minute periods, if needed. (Ideas: safely walk up and down steps, march while folding laundry or do arm circles and leg lifts while watching television.)