

5 ways to keep your memory strong

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
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Many of us are concerned as we get older that our memory 'is just not what it used to be'. Some age related change in memory can be normal. As we get older, it is more likely that we will notice some loss in our short-term memory - our ability to readily recall information that was recently learned. We may find ourselves forgetting the name of the person we were just introduced to or not remembering where we put our keys. Long-term memory - the ability to recall events that are many years past is not as affected by aging. Dementia is a term used to describe a serious form of memory loss that goes beyond what is normally seen with aging. Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of dementia in the U.S. While the exact cause of Alzheimer's disease is not clear, research has some clues to perhaps lower our chances of developing this devastating condition and ways that we can improve and sustain a healthy memory. Here are some strategies to keep your memory strong.

How is your mood? Is stress an issue? Memory issues may be a sign of depression, especially in older adults. When we are feeling down and depressed we may process information more slowly and not remember new information as well. The same is true when we are very stressed. When we have many worries, it is hard to concentrate on one thing and learn new information. Despite what we may think, we can only think about one thing at a time. If our mind is overcome with worries, anxiety or sadness, it will be difficult to maintain mental focus. If depression or stress are issues for you (or a loved one), seek out assistance. There are many strategies to assist you in getting help with these issues and getting back to functioning your best.

Strengthen your body to strengthen your mind. When we exercise, a complex array of physical and chemical changes occur in our body. Our blood flow increases which may help us to think more clearly. As we age, it is normal to see some shrinking in the size of our brain and it is thought that some of the age-related declines in memory are a result of this shrinking. However, a study has shown that regular exercise such as walking is associated with less brain shrinkage. Exercise is also a potent stress-reducer and has been shown to improve mood. In fact, previous studies have shown that 30 minutes of exercise three times a week can be as effective as an anti-depressant pill for some people with depression.

Eat your colors and spice it up. When our cells become damaged, they do not function normally and it is thought that this cell damage may be a common pathway for many disease and aging processes including Alzheimer's, Diabetes and Arthritis. Antioxidants are strong chemical compounds that are thought to protect against cell damage. Natural antioxidants are abundant in many fresh and whole foods especially berries, and some beans (see my website for a listing of high antioxidant foods). Also, some spices and green tea are high in antioxidants. So try to get your 'dose' of anti-oxidants by including these rich antioxidant foods in your diet. While it is possible to buy anti-oxidant vitamins and in supplements, so far, these non-food antioxidant sources have not been proven by science to be helpful. Eating antioxidant foods is the better (and cheaper) bet.

Diabetes and high blood pressure - prevent them or control them. Diabetes and high blood sugars have been associated with an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and memory problems in general. If you already have diabetes, it is important to know that people with well controlled diabetes have less decline in memory than those whose diabetes is not well

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controlled. So work on controlling your disease to the best of your ability. High blood pressure also can also be associated with memory problems. Some people with a long-standing history of high blood pressure will get small strokes (often unrecognized) and these can lead to memory problems. This is called multi-infarct dementia. Maintaining good blood pressure control with lifestyle changes and medications (if needed) is a way to decrease your chances of developing this condition.

Keep learning and maintain connections. Learning new skills and information is a way to keep our brains strong and youthful. This does not mean that you have to go back to school. Perhaps you have always wanted to learn to draw or how to knit or speak Swahili. When we are learning new skills our brain is active and creating new connections. We can also create and maintain connections with people -- family members, friends, members of our community. Sharing our skills and experiences keeps us engaged and excited about our life and its myriad possibilities. Remember, strong life, strong body, stronger memory.

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you! To respond to this article, request topics for future articles and for additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.com or LIKE Function Well Medicine on Facebook.

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