

Keeping Your Brain in Top Shape

by *Winston J. Craig*

Lifestyle habits can have a significant influence upon brain functions such as memory, learning, judgment, and mental acuity. Firstly, it is important to manage stress since chronic stress can negatively effect memory. Under stress, it is harder to remember things and to create memory files for new information.

Getting sufficient sleep is important to maintain cognitive function. A regular loss of one to two hours of sleep a night can impair brain function. Other factors which can cause memory problems are depression, use of certain prescription drugs, headaches, and dealing with chronic pain.

Elevated blood pressure during mid-life can result in a loss of cognitive function in later life. A Swedish study found that persons who were obese in their 50's, and who had high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure, were up to six-fold more likely to develop Alzheimer's.

Impaired blood glucose metabolism impacts memory. Antonio J. Convit, an associate professor at New York University School of Medicine, Center for Brain Health, reported that persons with elevated blood sugar levels performed poorer on short-term memory tests than persons with normal levels. Regular aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking, can improve blood flow to the brain and enhance memory. Men over age 70 who remained as active as they had been earlier in life were found to stay more mentally alert.

Good food choices influence brain function and cognition. The flavonoid quercetin, found in rich supply in apples, protects brain cells from being damaged by free radicals. Red apples typically have higher levels than green or yellow apples. Other foods rich in quercetin include onions, blueberries, and cranberries. In rat studies, adding blueberries or purple grape juice to the diet improved short-term memory in aging neurons.

Aging women experienced less cognitive decline when they consumed higher amounts of green, leafy vegetables and cruciferous vegetables (cauliflower, cabbage, and broccoli) or lignan-rich foods such as sesame, flax, broccoli, and berries. The spice turmeric has shown great promise in reducing plaque levels and dementia in aging brains.

A deficiency of certain nutrients can play a detrimental role in brain function. Irritability, depression, and confusion can result when diets are consumed over a time period, which are substantially deficient in B vitamins such as thiamin, niacin, and pyridoxine. Vitamin B12 deficiency in the elderly can also slowly lead to various levels of dementia. Iron deficiency has been found to be associated with poor attention, altered learning and memory, and depression.

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Regular exercise can enhance memory,
Stress, loss of sleep, and depression can negatively impact memory.