



Use it or lose it

What activities are good for keeping one's brain fit?

Experts Kaarin Anstey

Common sense tells us that we need to keep our minds active. Even Cicero wrote about this in his treatise on ageing in 44BC when he said "Old men retain their intellects well enough, if only they keep their minds active and fully employed".

Science has now proven the benefits of mental activity. Older adults who complete memory training programs have an increase in gray matter in relevant brain regions. Adults who were trained in skills of speed of processing showed less cognitive decline over 10 years. London taxi drivers have larger hippocampi – which is the part of the brain associated with memory, and a growth in the size of the hippocampus was seen in aspiring taxi drivers who trained on 'The Knowledge'.

Computerised brain training packages can improve cognitive abilities on the skills trained and have long term benefits. We still don't know the extent to which this transfers to everyday activities or prevents dementia. One limitation of research in this area is that newer interventions such as brain training games have not yet been compared with the more traditional forms of mental activities such as reading books, attending concerts and plays, learning photography, writing emails and letters, and enrolling in continuing education courses or learning new dancing routines. While the research shows that just about any new, stimulating activity has cognitive benefits, we don't yet have the knowledge to prescribe dosage and type of mental activity in the way one might prescribe physical exercises. Here are some areas where the science is strong:

We need to keep our kids in education. Education is critical for developing brain capacity that will endure throughout adulthood and provide a buffer against the effects of ageing and disease. Keeping all children in school until the age of 15 would reduce

dementia rates internationally. Ideally children will stay at school as long as possible.

We all need to keep learning new things as adults. Continuing education in adulthood is good for the brain and may reduce risk of later cognitive decline. Any form of new learning, including learning in the workplace, seems to be beneficial and often specific activities lead to measureable changes in the brain.

A cognitively active lifestyle reduces the risk of dementia. At least two long term studies have shown this. In those studies 'cognitive activity' included going to concerts, plays, museums, reading, writing letters, playing games and so forth.

Too much TV is not good for you. Spending long periods of time watching television has been linked to increased risk of dementia, along with increased waistlines and shorter lifespan.

It is likely that serious engagement in new and challenging learning, such as learning a language or undertaking higher education, is one of the best ways to reduce your risk of 'losing it'. Cognitive health or brain health is part of overall health and exercise is again one of the best means of maintaining it.

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