

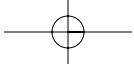


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Get Smart

By Linda Meierhoffer

Our memory orients us. Without it we can lose all sense of who we are, where we are, who and what we care about, and in the end, the operation of our bodies. There is no greater horror devised by science fiction; even the small slips are scary.



And despite July's hopeful news from Scotland about a promising trial for Rember, a drug that appears to halt cognitive decline in patients suffering from mild and moderate Alzheimer's, don't get comfortable just yet. You've got work to do.

Workouts to keep our flabby abs in shape as we age are important, but exercises to keep our aging brains in shape are critical, according to neurology experts around the state. Even for those of us who may have damaged our brains through the years by eating junk food or drinking too much alcohol there's hope. Like the new pink of the lungs in an ex-smoker who has kicked the habit, we can get our brains back on track by simply learning new things in new ways. We each possess the key to a healthy brain.

AGING SMART

In the 1967 movie "The Graduate," Dustin Hoffman's character Benjamin is told that the key to his future is plastics. Fast forward to 2008, and he would more likely hear this prediction: plasticity.

Neurology experts used to think that the brain was plastic, or malleable, when we were young, but that as adults, our brains' infrastructure was set. Instead, based on the work of neuroscientists like Michael Merzenich, PhD, at the University of California, San Francisco, we now know that the brain has plasticity throughout our lifetimes.

"The brain changes the details of its wiring each time we learn a new skill or ability," says Merzenich. "By training our brains to think again, we give a major boost in quality of life and become more confident out in the world."

You can start right on your home computer. Dr. Merzenich co-founded Posit Science, a company whose Brain Fitness Program was designed to improve the quality and amount of information our brains absorb through our ears. Users receive a CD, headphones and simple instructions that allow them to point and click to complete the exercises. "Brain Fitness helps users re-sharpen how they process information," says Merzenich. "The brain needs exercise, just like the rest of our body, and we've seen positive results in people who completed 40 hours of our program in a large controlled trial." After measuring the speed and accuracy of several hundred people who completed the program, a majority tested at least 10 years younger than their actual ages in cognitive abilities. "Our goal is to help sustain people's mental fitness to the end of their lives," says Merzenich. And, incidentally, in a differ-



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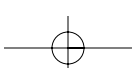


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ent set of studies, participants who completed InSight, Posit Science's program to improve users' visual processes, exhibited less depression, had fewer car accidents and lived more independently, which results in lower health care costs, too.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

Joining Merzenich in debunking the belief that mental acuity automatically declines with age is Rancho Mirage resident James Ausman, MD, PhD. He serves as Professor of Neurosurgery at UCLA and editor of the journal *Surgical Neurology*. "We are not born with a certain number of brain cells, and at a certain age, that's it," he says. "There is good scientific evidence that we produce new brain cells until the day we die. When there is mental decline in the absence of disease, it's because of inactivity—lack of exercise, loneliness, limited interaction with others and no variety or new challenges in a person's life."

Ausman points out that we spend a lot of time planning the financial aspects of our retirement, but forget the social or psychological parts. "It's like taking a high-powered



JAMES AUSMAN, MD PhD

machine that's been running at full-speed for years and then putting it in the garage to rust," he says. His advice? "There is no magic pill to keep your mind healthy. The answer is to stimulate the brain with a variety of new tasks." He suggests doing crossword puzzles at least four times a week, dancing, going back to school to learn something new, volunteering, returning to work, tackling a new hobby, learning to play an instrument and traveling to places you've never been.

"Stimulate your brain like you did in your youth, or you will lose it," he warns.

GET OUT THERE

The Joslyn Senior Center in Palm Desert is a place for people 50 and older who are "using it" instead of "losing it." For \$20 a year, members can attend concerts, theater or tea dances. They can take classes in everything from ballet and creative writing to western-style line dancing.

"Our members keep active by playing bridge or mah-jongg," says Peter Rittenhouse, Joslyn's executive director. "But the big one for our folks is dancing; it requires keeping a beat, talking with a partner and remembering the steps," he says. "It's being with others and maintaining relationships that keeps their minds sharp."

"Sharp" is an understatement when describing Dixie Lee Lohoff, 78 (above, right), of Palm Desert, a Joslyn regular. "She came to the Fourth of July party in a sequined red, white and blue outfit," says Rittenhouse, "showing as much leg as a Rockette."

"If you have good legs, you might as well show 'em," laughs Lohoff.

When asked to give her secret for such an active life, she says, "I wake up happy, and it's infectious." That attitude carries her through her regular golf games, dancing twice a week, learning to rock-climb and to ride a zip line across a valley in Mexico recently, teaching tai chi, volunteering with a group of "lively and upbeat" fourth-graders at St. Margaret's School and providing physical therapy for her 93-year-old sister and others at the assisted living facility where her sister resides.

Anything else? "Oh, and I belly dance, too," Lohoff giggles, sounding exactly like someone who has taken years off her age through learning, doing and moving.



BRAIN-BOOSTING NUTRIENTS

While brain-enhancing nutrients are found in foods like wild salmon and green leafy vegetables, very few people are able to get adequate amounts naturally. Some people try to build brainpower by taking nutritional health supplements that contain Omega-3 fatty acids and folic acid.

The experts interviewed for this article agree that supplements with antioxidant and other protective properties are good for us. But when we are bombarded with ads in the media about these over-the-counter wonder drugs, how do we find out which ones are safe and effective?

"There are hundreds of semi-controlled studies out there that tout these supplements, but only a handful of controlled clinical trials to determine their efficacy, which is what doctors consider the gold standard," says Dr. Merzenich. He encourages people to visit reputable Web sites to obtain information about supplements and nutritional foods, such as those sites sponsored by the National Institutes of Aging or the Mayo Clinic.

Stephen Geist, Regional Director of the Alzheimer's Association in the Coachella Valley, agrees. "We do advocate for antioxidants, folates and fish oils, which help with vascular health and cholesterol so that our arteries are strong enough to pump good blood to the brain," he says. "But relaxation is also key in older folks, since high adrenaline levels from stress can be toxic to the brain."

WHAT'S NEXT

Could it be possible to "go green" in our brains, recycling the old, bad stuff to make room for the new. Researcher Kim Finley, PhD has already succeeded with this idea by working with simple fruit fly brains. "In a process called autophagy, unhealthy cellular 'trash' or 'garbage' is wrapped and sent to the recycling center of the cell," she says. Her work at the Salk Institute for Biological Research in La Jolla demon-



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Dr. Kim Finley, PhD

strates that when fruit flies have more cleaning capacity in their brain cells, they live longer — a dramatic 55 percent longer, on average.

“Since both flies and people have the same trash removal system, the push is to see if these ideas can be tested in people, to see if regular cell ‘cleaning’ gives us longer, healthier lives,” Finley says. Results from these studies could be in human trials in as little as five years according to Dr. Finley, who is now at San Diego State University’s BioScience Center.

INVEST IN PLASTICITY

Our experts give us this investment tip for the future: Tap into the plasticity that the brain already possesses, and misplaced car keys and reminder grocery lists can become relics of the past. By challenging ourselves to learn new skills and waking up with a smile everyday like Palm Desert’s unstoppable Dixie Lee Lohoff, we can replace loss of memory and brain function with classes and dances and golf—and learn a new way to age.

Linda Meierhoffer, a resident of both Palm Springs and Leawood, Kan., has specialized in healthcare communications, administration and marketing since the 1970s, and was recently published in “The American Journal of Nursing.”

MEMORY AIDS

THE LEADING GEN!

Dr. Ausman rejects the term “senior” to describe folks over 60. “My wife and I founded an organization called The Leading Gen! because that’s what this generation is all about,” says Ausman.

“We have the experience to provide leadership in developing new lifestyles and finding solutions to the fact that our lifespan has nearly doubled in the last 100 years.” Go to theleadinggen.org

and click on Helpful Links to get a wealth of information on brain health, nutrition, exercise and more.

Dr. Ausman recommends the book: “The Memory Prescription, Dr. Gary Small’s 14-day plan to keep your brain and body young,” by Gary Small, MD, Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the UCLA Center on Aging.

POSIT SCIENCE

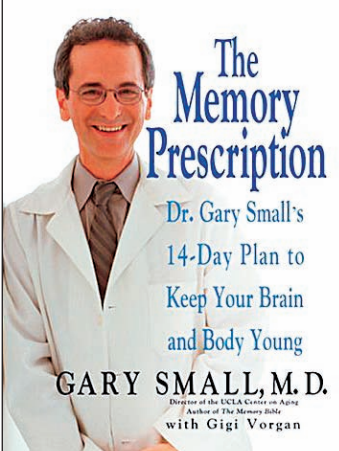
Some insurers (like Humana) cover part, or all, of the cost of the Brain Fitness program, which sells for about \$400; positscience.com.

SUPPLEMENTS

Which supplements are safe? Go to mayoclinic.com and click on Drugs and Supplements; or go to nih.gov and click on Wellness and Lifestyle; or nia.nih.gov and click on Health.

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