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IN GOOD HEALTH

## YOUR BRAIN—THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR BODY

When you think about getting older, what concerns you the most? According to the Alzheimer’s Disease Foundation, more people report apprehension about memory loss than about than any other medical condition, including heart disease and cancer.

As we age, it becomes harder to remember facts and recall details, and we will likely experience memory changes. Many worry such changes are the first sign of Alzheimer’s Disease or dementia. This is a realistic concern, since according to a recent report from the Alzheimer’s Association, one out of eight people will develop dementia. But the good news is that for most of us, our memory will remain pretty much the same.

### How Does the Brain Work?

The brain is the most complex part of the human body. It holds everything we know, it’s where our senses originate, and it’s what tells our bodies to move. The brain has three main parts: the Cerebrum, the Cerebellum, and the Brain Stem:

- **The Cerebrum (outer part of the brain)**
  - The cerebrum allows us to learn, read, think, speak, see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. It controls our emotions and directs our muscles to work so we can walk and run. It’s divided into two hemispheres or halves—the right half controls the left side of the body and the left side controls the right side.
- **Cerebellum (back of the brain)**
  - The cerebellum controls balance, coordination, and posture.
- **Brain Stem (bottom of the brain)**
  - The brain stem works as a connector, linking the cerebrum to the spinal column. The brain stem is responsible for keeping us alive. It regulates our breathing, eye movements, blood pressure, heartbeat, and swallowing.

As you can see, we can’t live without our brains. Some of brain health is hereditary, but just as we work to keep our bodies in shape, we can do the same for our brains.

### How to Take Care of You Brain:

1. **Good Nutrition**—A heart-smart diet is also a brain-smart diet. A high level of good cholesterol (HDL) is linked to a lower risk of dementia. Eat a rainbow diet of fruits, vegetables, and fish. Use olive, canola, or avocado oil. Talk to your doctor about taking a multi-vitamin.
2. **Exercise Regularly**—A National Institute on Aging-funded study showed that moderate aerobic exercise can actually increase the size of the area of the brain involved in memory formation.
3. **Sleep**—Those that suffer from sleep disturbances often experience memory problems too. If you have trouble falling asleep or suffer from sleep apnea (breathing stops and starts while you are sleeping) talk to your doctor.
4. **Treat Depression and Control Stress**—Both cause chemical changes in the brain. When you are overly stressed or sad, it makes it harder to concentrate. Talk to your doctor about a plan to get your mental health under control.
5. **Quit smoking and Limit Alcohol Consumption**—The chemicals in cigarette smoke damage brain tissue. Drinking alcohol in moderation may be safe and perhaps beneficial; however, more than one or two drinks a day can harm the brain.
6. **Avoid a High-Sugar Diet**—High blood sugar can increase your risk for dementia, even without diabetes. Avoid highly-sweetened foods like sodas and candy.
7. **Challenge Your Brain**—Word searches, crossword puzzles, and board games are all great. Download games on your smart phone and choose those that challenge your brain.
8. **Never Be Shy or Afraid to Discuss Memory Concerns with Your Health Care Provider**—The sooner potential problems are discussed and identified, the sooner they can be treated.
9. **Talk to You Doctor About the Medications You are Taking**—Some drugs, such as sedatives for anxiety, can affect thinking.
10. **Stay Socially Active**—Friends and family matter. A good conversation does the brain wonders.