



# Healthy Aging with a Healthy Brain

## Fact Sheet

Your brain does your thinking, but do you often think about your brain? Taking steps to improve brain health leads to improved memory, better learning and problem solving, and decreases your chances of developing dementia. Genetics play a role, but lifestyle choices have a profound impact on both your body and your brain. You can improve the health of your brain through sleep, exercise, staying mentally fit, eating the right foods, and keeping up your social connections.

### Get A Full Night's Sleep

People over 65 should strive for an average of seven to eight hours of sleep a night. Proper sleep can help boost brain health and memory. Sleep helps you reenergize and boosts your immune system and mood. Better sleep practices can be achieved by having a fixed wake-up and bedtime, keeping a nightly routine, and limiting naps during the day (if they prevent night-time sleep). The amount of light in your environment can also affect sleep patterns. Bright lights during the day and dim lights before bed can be helpful to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Also, consider turning off electronics 30 to 60 minutes before heading to bed.

### Get Fit

Physical activity also helps maintain brain health. Physically active adults are less likely to experience a decline in mental function as they age and have a lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Physical activity improves blood flow, memory, and encourages beneficial chemical changes within the brain. Increased heart rate during exercise increases oxygen in the brain while hormones released during exercise create a strong environment for brain cell growth. Aerobic exercise, such as walking or swimming, is a great way to keep your brain and body healthy. Try to build up to 150 minutes of exercise each week.

Physical activity can also improve balance and strength and reduce your risk of a fall which can result in a brain injury. If you are concerned about falling, ask your doctor for a falls risk assessment and consider taking the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging's Stepping On class, which has been proven to reduce falls and visits to the hospital and emergency room (*see link on next page*).

### Exercise Your Brain

Exercising your brain can improve function, memory, focus and lower your risk of dementia. Doing puzzles, playing cards and other games, reading, or learning new skills such as painting or playing a musical instrument can help. Take a class, learn a foreign language, take up a new hobby or travel somewhere you have always wanted to go. Keeping your brain engaged and stimulated supports brain health.

## Support brain health - join a healthy aging workshop!

The Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA), along with its network of program providers, offers a wide range of programs that benefit your brain and your body. Whether you want to prevent a fall, manage your diabetes or another health problem such as chronic pain or incontinence symptoms, increase your physical activity or find support for your caregiving role, you will find what you are looking for at WIHA.

Check us out at  
<https://wihealthyaging.org>



## Reduce Stress and Anxiety

Managing stress can also improve your brain health. Stress and anxiety can lead to memory loss by interfering with neurotransmitters and creating toxins that can cause shrinkage in the brain. Control stress by incorporating periods of relaxation and downtime into your day. Meditation or prayer, exercise, and, in some situations, therapy or medications are all good ways to reduce stress. If you are experiencing anxiety or depression or are concerned about your mental health, consider talking to your health care provider.

## Stay Socially Active

Loneliness and isolation can lead to increased risk of dementia. Remaining socially active can help lower your chances of a decline in brain health. Staying connected to your community, family and friends can be extremely beneficial to your brain. Those who are socially active show a slower rate of memory decline than those who are socially isolated. Social engagement can prompt critical thinking, meaningful conversations, and intellectual activities that support brain health.

How do you stay socially active? Joining a local club or exercise program can be a great addition to your social routine. Attending a healthy aging program such as those offered by the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging is a great way to connect with others while addressing important health concerns.

## Eat a Healthy Diet

Your diet plays a large role in your brain health. “You are what you eat” certainly applies to how food impacts your brain. Eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, whole grains, and a diet with less salt can help brain function and health. Research shows that the Mediterranean diet helps maintain brain health and can help reduce the risk for dementia. The Mediterranean diet is rich in fish, green leafy vegetables, olives, nuts and whole grains. Limiting saturated fats such as dairy products and red meat can be valuable as well. These foods have been associated with heart disease and Alzheimer’s disease.

## For more information on brain health, visit:

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/topics/brain-health>