





STAY SHARP YOUR WHOLE LIFE

You've heard that drinking tea and learning a new language are smart ways to keep your brain healthy. But what about eating Indian food and taking a 30-minute nap? We look at the latest science on what really works.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMIE JONES

Y

ou are out to dinner and feel a hand on your shoulder as a familiar voice says your name. You turn around and

this person is smiling. You know her—you've known her for years, in fact. But her name has evaporated from your mind, and all you can muster is a "Hey...you!"

Before you start Googling "signs of dementia," rest assured that some changes in memory and cognition are a normal part of the aging process, especially if they manifest as trouble finding words or momentary lapses in attention (*Why did I walk into the kitchen?*). "Many of our cognitive skills, like multitasking and processing speed, peak around age 30 and then tend to decline very subtly with age," says Joel Kramer, Psy.D., director of the University of California San Francisco Memory and Aging Neuropsychology program.

But they don't have to. By making smart lifestyle choices, you can retrain your brain so it stays sharp and focused. We asked some of the brainiest experts for research-backed tips on keeping your noggin young.



TRY NOT TO GOOGLE IT



The Internet is great for telling you the name of that actor whose name won't budge from the tip of your tongue. But it's fueling a modern-day condition called digital amnesia—forgetting information because you trust a computerized device to remember it for you. It's the reason half of us can't phone our children or office


without using our contacts list, according to a survey by Internet security company Kaspersky Lab.

"The brain is a use-it-or-lose-it machine," says Sara Mednick, Ph.D., an associate professor of cognitive science at the University of California, Irvine. When we learn new things and then recall them later, we activate the hippocampus and

the prefrontal cortex, areas of the brain intimately involved with memory. But when we rely on external sources, like our phones or the Internet, to remember for us, those regions of the brain can weaken.

The next time you're struggling to name an actor, challenge yourself not to look it up. "Work through it and trust that your brain knows the answer—you just need to find it in there," Mednick says. Similarly, try to make your way to a new address without using Google Maps—or if that's too daunting, take a new route home from work. "It's all about not living in automatic mode," Mednick says. "The more you think things through or try novel approaches, the more you engage your brain to keep it healthier longer."

TAKE A NAP

 Quality restful sleep is non-negotiable when it comes to thinking fast on your feet. As we progress from slow-wave sleep in the first part of the night to REM sleep in the early morning hours, our memories transform the material we learned throughout the day into actual working knowledge.

There's no substitute for getting those seven to eight hours. But a strategically timed nap can come surprisingly close,

says Mednick. "When we nap in the middle of the day, our time in each stage is more efficient," she says. "In a 90-minute nap, you cycle through both slow-wave and REM sleep, but you do it in the same proportion as it occurs across a whole night of sleep." Because of this, "a 90-minute nap can rival what you'd get overnight in terms of memory consolidation, creativity, and productivity." Too tricky to fit 90 minutes into your schedule? A 30-minute nap can help lock in information too.



GET PHYSICAL EVERY DAY

➔ Any time you move in a way that gets your blood pumping, you give your brain a boost. "Blood is filled with oxygen and nutrients that feed our brains," says Gary W. Small, M.D., director

of the UCLA Longevity Center and the author of *2 Weeks to a Younger Brain*. Exercise also spurs the body to produce a protein that "acts like fertilizer for the brain, stimulating neurons to sprout branches so they can communicate


more effectively," says Dr. Small. When University of Illinois researchers asked 120 adults between 55 and 80 to spend 40 minutes three days per week either walking briskly or stretching and toning, they found that after one year, a memory center (the hippocampus) of the walkers' brains was 2% bigger than in the stretching and toning group. That percentage may sound small, but it's "enough to essentially reverse the brain shrinkage that naturally occurs with aging in the same period of time," Dr. Small notes. (Another reason to sign up for *Prevention's* Virtual Walk on May 2! See how at prevention.com/virtual-walk.)

Even a single workout could be enough to give you an immediate cognitive boost. A small but promising 2019 study found that people who did 30 minutes of stationary cycling had better ability to recall names than others who simply rested.



An illustration at the top of the page shows a man in a green sweater and blue pants carrying a large yellow pencil horizontally. The pencil is so large it extends across the width of the page. In the background, there are several floating squares in various colors (green, brown, blue, white) and a large, light blue square containing a dark blue checkmark. The man is walking towards the right.

TRY MONOTASKING

 Multitasking makes us feel productive, but the opposite is actually true. “The brain is not designed to focus on several tasks at once,” Dr. Small says. As a result, our brains feel stressed when we multitask, “and we make more errors, which has the ultimate effect of making us less efficient.” (A four-second interruption—the time it takes to glance at your phone—can triple your chances of making a mistake during a task.)

That stress, perceived or not, also triggers the release of hormones that interfere with short-term

memory. That’s why if the phone rings when you’re in the midst of a conversation with someone, it can be tricky to remember what you were saying after you hang up.

Instead of attempting to juggle your entire to-do list simultaneously, work smarter and monotask. First, place your phone out of sight; the brain’s ability to hold and process data is compromised whenever a smartphone is within reach, even if it’s powered off. Dr. Small says that designating specific times to answer email every day may squash the compulsion to check

your inbox constantly. If the lure of email or social media is too tempting, use a digital time management program like Time Doctor or RescueTime to block access to specific sites.

Some people also find success with a technique called batching, in which you group similar tasks, then tackle them during a specific time period. “Schedule a time each day for small administrative tasks—ideally a time when you’re low on energy, like mid-afternoon,” says time-management expert Laura Vanderkam. This will let you focus on deeper work at other times—and you’ll be more efficient and sharper overall.



EAT FOR YOUR BRAIN

➔ Nutrition has a striking impact on your day-to-day memory and focus, shaping your ability to retain information and more. Try these science-based recommendations:

▶ **BERRIES AND BEETS**

Naturally occurring free radicals are constantly forming in the brain over the course of day-to-day living. If allowed to linger, “they act like rust, causing your

neurons to age faster,” says Lisa Mosconi, Ph.D., associate director of the Alzheimer’s Prevention Clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. Berries are bursting with anthocyanins, antioxidant compounds with a unique ability to cross the blood-brain barrier, meaning things in those raspberries actually enter your brain, grab free radicals, and escort them out “like police officers trapping the bad guys,” Mosconi says. Even small amounts can help. Beets are rich in nitrate, which is

converted to nitric oxide in the blood. Nitric oxide relaxes blood vessels throughout the body, enhancing blood flow. The more blood that reaches your brain, the sharper you’ll be.

▶ **TURMERIC**


This spice is rich in curcumin, a potent anti-inflammatory substance. In a small study, people without dementia who took 90 mg of it twice a day showed better memory and attention compared with those who took a placebo. “Curcumin might be one reason why people who eat a lot of Indian food or spicy curries tend to perform better on cognitive tests than those who don’t, and why rates of Alzheimer’s are lower in India than in the U.S.,” says Dr. Small, who led the study. Take a supplement (check with your doctor first) or try to cook with the spice twice a week. The oil used in cooking increases absorption, so you may not need to eat as much as you’d get in a supplement.

**DON'T
GET
HANGRY**

The cranky feeling you get when you're ravenous (hungry + angry) can sabotage more than your mood. "If you go too long without eating, your blood sugar levels drop, and that impairs your focus and decision-making," says Cleveland Clinic psychologist Susan Albers, Psy.D., author of *Hanger Management*. That's because your brain runs on glucose, or sugar, and for that you need food.

The amount of time it takes for "hanger" to hit varies from person to person, so the key is to know your own limit, then strive to stay one step ahead of your hunger throughout the day. Try noshing on something that offers protein and healthy fats for staying power, such as nuts, puffed chickpea snacks, or protein bars.

3 SURPRISING DEMENTIA LINKS

 People have a remarkable amount of control over certain lifestyle factors that can help reduce their risk of pathological brain changes. Studies suggest that "perhaps a third of all dementia may be associated with modifiable risk factors," Kramer says.

► **CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE:**

"Conditions that affect your heart also affect your brain's ability to function optimally," Kramer says. These include heart disease and high blood pressure, both strongly linked with cognitive decline. Do what you can to prevent or treat cardiovascular disease as well as obesity, which is linked with worsened memory and slower processing speed.

► **HIGH BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS:**

Dementia risk increases in people with type 2 diabetes (some doctors are even referring to AD as "type 3 diabetes"), but even non-diabetics with elevated blood sugar levels may be at increased risk for cognitive decline, possibly because of sugar's inflammatory effects on the



brain. Mosconi recommends focusing on natural sweeteners like honey and maple syrup, as well as fruit and dried fruit, instead of refined sugar.

► **LONELINESS:** Brain health is compromised by social isolation. "It's very stressful to feel alone. And stress is toxic to the brain and body," Mednick says, fueling inflammation that wreaks havoc on memory. To expand your connections, try volunteering or signing up for a class. Invite someone to dinner: It fosters conversation and a sense of closeness, both of which relieve inflammation-inducing stress.