

Stop brain drain

Lost your keys or phone – again? Jane Carstens shares ways to keep your mind sharp, no matter how many candles are on your birthday cake.

MOVE IT

Exercise & Sports Science Australia (ESSA) says Australians should get their runners out of the wardrobe to keep grey matter healthy and prevent future disorders.

“The Mayo Clinic in the US even say that exercise outweighs medication, intellectual ‘brain games’, diet and supplements to prevent Alzheimer’s disease,” says ESSA spokesperson Alex Lawrence. Tips on choosing the right physical exercise for your brain include: Incorporating aerobic exercise, because it improves brain function and acts as a ‘first aid kit’ on damaged brain cells; exercising in the morning because it spikes brain activity, prepares you for mental stresses for the rest of the day, increases retention of new information, and helps you respond to complex situations; choosing exercises that involve coordination and cardiovascular exercise, such as dance classes; and choosing circuit workouts at the gym because they quickly spike your heart rate and constantly redirect your attention.

LOVE YOUR GUTS

“The human gut is home to hundreds of trillions of microorganisms, collectively called the microbiome. They outnumber the cells that make up the body by more than 10 to one,” says Professor Simon Carding from Norwich Medical



School and the Institute for Food Research. “There is growing evidence that gut microbes influence the brain, affecting our behaviour, possibly even influencing what, when and how often we eat.”

Delia McCabe, author of *Feed Your Brain* (www.exislepublishing.com.au), says the gut and brain are intricately connected. “If anything upsets the gut, then that person’s cognitive function will suffer,” she says. Giulia Enders, author of *Gut*, notes that irritations in the gut show up on brain scans, and an unhappy gut can be the cause of an unhappy mind.

The solution? Fix your gut health with a healthy diet that includes fibre, prebiotics, and probiotics.

SLASH YOUR DIABETES RISK

Diabetes doubles your risk of developing dementia, and while the reasons are not clear, it is likely to involve several factors including: High blood glucose and insulin levels, which can damage blood vessels in the brain; plus, diabetes may contribute to the build-up of proteins in the brain associated with Alzheimer’s disease.

“It is important to highlight the undeniable links between diabetes and dementia,” says National CEO of Alzheimer’s Australia, Maree McCabe. “The risk of developing dementia in the general population is around 10 percent - but for people with diabetes this risk significantly increases to around 20 percent.”

Risk reduction strategies include asking your health professional to check your blood sugar levels regularly, maintaining a healthy weight, healthy eating, reducing alcohol intake, and not smoking.

STRESS LESS

McCabe says our brains are only equipped to handle stress for periods of 30 to 60 seconds at a time, based on our primitive fight-or-flight response. “Ongoing, unrelenting stress takes a huge toll on brain function, ultimately leading to cognitive decline, particularly in relation to memory,” she says.

The upside is there are lots of ways to beat stress, including exercise, yoga, meditation, adopting a pet, joining a club, socialising, dancing - the list is endless. You can also consciously decide how you will respond to situations to make them less stressful.

FEED YOUR MIND

“Feeding your brain what it needs is a natural way to feel happier, enjoy more stable moods, and also lose weight and improve your cognitive ability,” explains McCabe. In a nutshell, your brain needs energy in the form of glucose, protein to build and repair neurons (and make neurotransmitters) and fats to protect them, and vitamins and minerals to

assist with making energy and neurotransmitters. Brain-healthy foods include fresh nuts and seeds, fresh fruits and vegetables (organic when possible), colourful salads, a natural multivitamin supplement, natural sweeteners (used sparingly) such as rice syrup or pure maple syrup, organic meats, fish, legumes such as beans, lentil or chickpeas, as well as cooking with healthy fats such as coconut oil, and choosing water as your drink of choice.

AVOID ADDITIVES


This is a biggie because there are more than 10,000 chemicals used in the food industry. “Eating processed foods results in chemical imbalances in the brain leading to behavioural challenges. Many of these effects are not easily diagnosed and often only become apparent later in life,” explains McCabe.

When pressed to narrow these 10,000 or so down to her two biggest villains, McCabe names tartrazine (102) and monosodium glutamate or MSG (621). “Tartrazine is used in soft drinks and orange-coloured snacks and is implicated in hyperactivity disorder in children. It’s also an anti-nutrient because it leaches zinc, required for proper brain function, out of the body.” McCabe says MSG made the final cut because it is an excitotoxin. “This means it causes specific neurons to become overstimulated, making them incapable of switching off and eventually dying,” she says.

THINK POSITIVELY

This flies against everything our youth-obsessed culture stands for, but hear me out. Tony Buzan, author of *Age-Proof Your Brain*, says if you expect your memory to fade and your mental powers to decline as you get older, then your expectation will probably come true. But, if you expect to gather wisdom as you go through life and have stronger mental powers in your older years, then it is likely this will be the case too. Think self-fulfilling prophecy here.

Buzan points to research which compared the memory performance of a group from China with a group from the USA. The researchers found no difference between the young people from each group, but the older USA participants were outperformed by their Chinese counterparts who had a more positive attitude to ageing. Pointedly, the Americans who had a positive outlook on ageing also outperformed their compatriots who had a negative outlook.

Alzheimer’s Australia has developed *BrainyApp* to help people improve their brain health. Based on scientific research, the app supports people to look after their heart health, find ways to be physically active, mentally challenge their brain, follow a healthy diet and find ways to stay socially active. *BrainyApp* is a free download for both Apple and Android devices via the App Store and Google Play. 

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