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Exercise and Your Brain

If you want to take care of your brain, you need to first take care of your body. Research consistently shows that people who lead a healthful lifestyle, including regular exercise and good nutrition, are less likely to experience cognitive declines associated with the aging process.

So, why is exercise so beneficial for your brain? Studies suggest that exercise can protect your brain from shrinkage as it ages. Exercise can promote neurogenesis, the formation of new brain cells in the brain's hippocampus – the part of your brain associated with memory, learning, and emotions. Exercise also helps prevent many of the conditions linked to dementia, like obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and depression.

Exercise helps your brain in many ways that are beneficial at any age or stage of life. It can help you pay attention and focus, a benefit that is more noticeable after vigorous intensity exercise. It can also help your memory. Activities like walking, jogging, or gardening may help your brain's hippocampus grow. Some studies show this regrowth is even stronger if you enjoy the activity you are doing.

Physical activity is one of the best ways to treat depression and anxiety. It also helps improve blood flow, in part because it makes your heart and blood vessels stronger, which appears to help stop the buildup of plaques linked to dementia.

Have you ever taken a walk just to clear your mind? Exercise can improve your ability to organize and interpret information so that it makes sense. And, it helps you sleep better. Exercise can help you manage mood swings, wind down at bedtime, and establish a healthy sleep-wake cycle. A restful, deep sleep helps revitalize your brain and body.

Tiny Habits

In addition to carving out time for physical activity, including moderate intensity (walking, biking, etc.) and strengthening exercises, it is also important to just move more and sit less throughout your day. This is where “tiny habits” can have great impact. When established, these tiny habits are easy to accomplish because they happen “automatically” and don’t require much thought or planning. They are small bits of movement, integrated into your day, that have become habits.

This Tiny Habits approach, developed by BJ Fogg, Director of the Behavior Design Lab at Stanford University (<https://tinyhabits.com/>), can be summed up like this: If you want to create a new habit, plan to do it RIGHT AFTER an existing habit that you already do reliably. Here are steps to help you create tiny habits that work for you:

1. Think about tasks that you do consistently throughout a typical day. Perhaps you can relate to one of these – sending emails and brushing your teeth.
2. Now, think about a small behavior (related to sitting less or moving more) that you would like to do more consistently. Some examples: Stand up and stretch more often; improve your balance.
3. Finally, create your tiny habit: After I hit send on an email, I will stand up and stretch; while I brush my teeth, I will stand on one foot/leg to improve my balance.

Tiny habits, like these, work because you’re sequencing a new habit with something you already do reliably, building it into your typical routine without disruption. You can also think about adding and connecting activity, or other healthful behaviors, to other things you do consistently, such as:



- » Park further away from your destination.
- » Stand up and walk around while talking on the phone and during TV commercials.
- » Lift light weights while on a Zoom call (with your camera off).
- » Set an alarm to prompt you to get up and move a little every hour.
- » Walk the stairs whenever possible, instead of taking an elevator.
- » When eating out (and at home) have water with your meal instead of ordering a beverage.
- » Keep a bowl of fruit on your desk or kitchen counter so it is ready for a quick snack.

What are some ways you can create tiny habits to increase physical activity and make healthier choices? How can you connect these with things you already do throughout your day?

Habit Shift Challenge

This week attempt to stand up and stretch every hour. Think about how you can “trigger” yourself to accomplish this. Set a timer on your phone, watch, or computer or search for an app that will remind you to take a mental and physical break. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. Just stop what you are doing, stand up, reach over your head, touch your toes, roll your shoulders, take a deep breath, and go on.

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This newsletter developed by Sharolyn Flaming Jackson, Extension Specialist Family and Consumer Sciences, K-State Research and Extension

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Shift to Whole Grains

Whole grains are essential for good health. They provide energy, help promote digestive health, and reduce the risk of developing a number of diseases. Whole-grain foods are also more satisfying, they have great texture and taste, and provide a feeling of fullness.

While health benefits from whole grains are known, only 10 percent of Americans eat the recommended minimum of three servings a day. Why? It can be difficult to tell which foods are whole grain. Package labels might say “multigrain,” “100% wheat,” “stone ground” and while these sound like it, they are not whole grain. Look for some type of a whole grain stamp on the product, to be sure. Also, check the ingredient list. Look for the word “whole” in front of a grain, such as “whole wheat.” If the list starts with “wheat flour” it is not a whole grain.

Common whole grains include brown rice, oatmeal, popcorn, whole wheat, and wild rice. Expand your whole grain choices with quinoa, whole-grain barley, whole-grain corn or cornmeal, whole rye, and others. One easy way to add whole grain is to replace half the flour in a recipe with whole-wheat flour. Give white whole-wheat flour a try. White wheat is lighter in color and has a sweeter, milder, and somewhat nutty flavor, while having the same nutritional benefits as traditional wheat flour.

Here is a tip sheet for choosing more whole grains <https://medinsteadofmeds.com/tips-and-tools/make-your-grains-whole/>.



Nutrition Information per 1 serving:

Calories - 160; Total Fat - 5g; (1.5g saturated fat, 0g trans fat); Carbohydrates - 23g; Protein - 6g; Fiber - 3g; Sodium - 65mg; Sugar - 10g.

Berry Oatmeal Bake

Makes 9 Servings

Oatmeal ingredients:

Nonstick cooking spray

1¼ cups old fashioned rolled oats

1 tablespoon light brown sugar

Dash salt

1 ⅔ cups 1% reduced fat milk

1 large egg

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

¼ teaspoon pure almond extract

Topping ingredients:

⅓ cup skin-on sliced almonds

⅓ cup old fashioned rolled oats

2 tablespoons light brown sugar

1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted

1 tablespoon whole-wheat flour

½ teaspoon vanilla extract

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

12 ounces frozen mixed berries, thawed (2 ½ cups frozen; 1 ½ cups thawed)

6 tablespoons plain Greek yogurt, for serving, optional.

Directions:

1. Wash hands with soap and water.
2. Preheat oven to 350°F. Spray a 2-quart baking dish or 8-inch square baking pan with nonstick cooking spray.
3. For the oatmeal: Stir together the oats, brown sugar, and a dash of salt in a large bowl. Whisk together the milk, egg, vanilla, and almond extract in a medium bowl. Pour the milk mixture into the oat mixture and stir well to combine.
4. For the topping: Stir together the almonds, oats, brown sugar, butter, flour, vanilla, and cinnamon in a medium bowl until evenly combined.
5. Pour the oatmeal into the prepared baking dish. Arrange the berries (including any juices) over the oatmeal. Sprinkle with the topping. Bake until lightly browned and just set, about 50 minutes.
6. Let cool on a rack for 10 to 15 minutes. Serve warm with a dollop of yogurt, if preferred.