

# Keep your brain healthy for life

**L**ike the rest of your body, your brain changes as you age. But getting older doesn't have to mean losing your mental edge. Evolving research suggests there are several things you can do to keep your brain working well for the rest of your life, no matter how old you are now.

Some of the brain's changes begin in your early 20s; others take place in

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your 60s or 70s. These changes may result in decreased memory efficiency, slower reflexes, and a decreased ability to solve problems.

"We all lose brain cells throughout our life cycles," says David A. Peters, M.D., who practices geriatric psychiatry in Albuquerque. "The rates at which we lose some of those cells are determined by genetics and lifestyle—for example, a history of head traumas or accidents. Some emerging evidence suggests that alcohol consumption and chronic depression can be risk factors for developing dementia. Diabetes, cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and heart problems are all risk factors for cognitive decline as well."

But the belief that age and mental decline go hand in hand is a myth. In fact, research has shown that the brain can become more flexible and adapt-

able in middle age, resulting in greater creativity. Age may also curb some of the negative emotions people feel at younger ages. And the wisdom we gain through experience helps us solve problems better and have more satisfying social connections.

**Mental fitness** Your brain was designed to tackle challenges. Working at staying mentally active throughout life may help keep your brain in good health in your later years. To maximize your brain power, try these activities:

➤ **Get regular aerobic exercise.**

Exercise helps flow blood into, and waste products

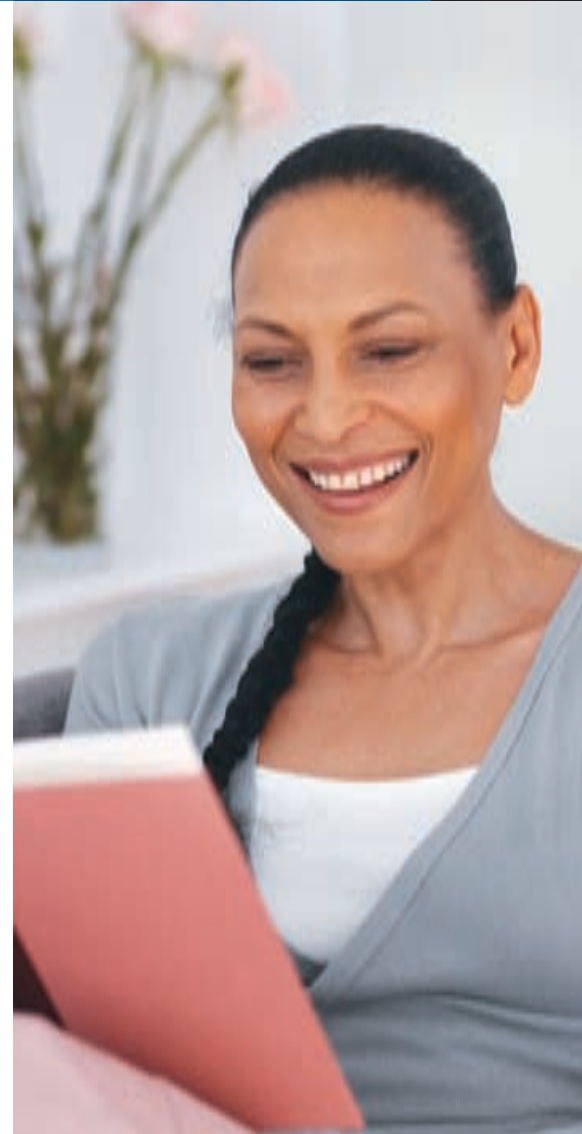
away from, the brain. Studies have shown that even exercise begun later in life may prevent the brain from losing function.

➤ **Give your brain a workout.** Mentally stimulating activities, such as educational programs, games, and discussion groups, can improve your memory, concentration, and problem-solving skills.

➤ **Try a new hobby.** Dancing, playing board games, learning a musical instrument, doing crossword puzzles, and reading may help slow cognitive decline.

➤ **Become an expert.** Whether you're learning a language or studying an art form, a sense of control and mastery will increase your general mental health and help improve your outlook on life.

➤ **Socialize.** People who build strong



social networks throughout life enjoy lower blood pressure and less stress, both of which boost brain health. Studies suggest that even people who develop social networks later in life benefit from less decline in their mental function.

In addition, eating a diet low in saturated fat and high in fresh fruits and vegetables nourishes your brain. Your brain may benefit if you eat fish that is high in omega-3 fatty acids twice a week. Salmon, mackerel, and some tuna are good sources, although pregnant women may want to consider moderation in fish consumption. And see your doctor for regular checkups to keep any health problems you may have under control.

Sources: AARP; Center on Aging, Health and Humanities; *Neurology*; *The Lancet Neurology*; American Geriatric Society