

- Brain / Memory

STAYING SHARP IN YOUR 50s AND BEYOND

THERE ARE NUMEROUS THINGS YOU CAN DO TO MAINTAIN BRAIN FUNCTION IN OLDER AGE, FINDS

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THE pandemic lockdowns had a “real lasting impact” on the brain health of people over 50, researchers have suggested.



A study by the University of Exeter and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King’s College London found that working memory and cognitive function in older people rapidly declined during the pandemic, regardless of whether people were diagnosed with Covid-19 or not.

The team said this could be due to a number of factors the pandemic exacerbated, including drinking too much alcohol, reduced physical activity, loneliness and depression.

Staying healthy in later life can sometimes be complex, especially if other health problems are in the mix.

But, generally speaking, is there anything people can do to help keep their cognitive function and memory sharp in their 50s and beyond?

We asked some experts...

DON’T STOP LEARNING

There’s often a belief that once you reach a certain age, it’s ‘too late’ to learn anything new.

“But that isn’t really the case,” Dr Anthony Thompson, postgraduate psychology programme leader at Arden University says.

“In fact, research shows that lifelong learning, along with formal education and literacy, is an important factor behind our health and security as we grow older.

“Research shows that learning new skills and acquiring knowledge can stimulate the growth of new neural connections and increase the brain’s overall plasticity,” he says. “This can have a range of positive effects on cognitive function, including improved memory, attention, and problem-solving skills.

“There is also a further societal impact here, too. We are an ageing population, which means there is added pressure for long-term care or healthcare support, alongside the need for economic markets to keep up with a growing population.

“Having an active older generation – whether that is through working or volunteering – reaps personal benefits and economic benefits for following generations.”

Whether it’s volunteering, taking up a new hobby, musical instrument or language, find new things to keep your mind well oiled.

STAY ACTIVE

“Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise per week,” says Dr Adam Moreton, consultant older adult psychiatrist at Pall Mall Medical.

“I wouldn’t recommend everybody take up marathon running, but most people can find some way to gradually and gently increase their levels of activity.”

There’s a wealth of research linking higher rates of physical activity with better physical and mental health in later life – including cognitive decline.

GET PLENTY OF SLEEP

“Quality sleep is essential for memory consolidation and cognitive function,” says Dr Moreton.

“Aim for seven to nine hours of uninterrupted sleep per night.

“Some people can manage on less, and how much sleep you need can change as you get older.

“But you should wake feeling refreshed in the morning and if that isn’t happening, then perhaps you aren’t getting enough sleep or there is another problem [such as depression] getting in the way.”

If you are struggling to sleep, check in with your GP in case there’s anything else going on that they can help with.

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BE MINDFUL OF YOUR DIET AND ALCOHOL INTAKE

Dr Anthony Thompson

The food and drink we consume is also a major factor for maintaining brain health.

Dr Moreton says: “A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins can support brain health. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish and nuts, may also be beneficial.

“It isn’t about denying yourself things you enjoy, that’s important too, but what you eat is essentially fuel for your body and your brain.

“Be sure to drink enough water throughout the day. But excessive alcohol consumption and smoking can harm cognitive function.

“Even if you can’t stop completely, then any reductions will be helpful.”

RELAX!

“Chronic stress can also have a negative impact on cognitive function,” says Dr Moreton.

“Practices like meditation, deep breathing, and yoga can help reduce stress.

“Stress and depression can sometimes look like dementia – however, the distinction is important as treatment for stress and depression should help resolve the memory problem.”

MAKE SURE CHRONIC HEALTH ISSUES ARE WELL MANAGED

Similarly, if you have chronic health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol, these can also effect cognitive health, particularly as we get older.

So it’s important to follow your GP’s advice and get your medication reviewed when necessary.

STAY CONNECTED

There are strong links between loneliness and social isolation and reduced physical and mental health – including cognitive decline.

“Maintaining social connections and staying mentally active through conversations and social activities can support cognitive health,” says Dr Moreton.

“Evidence shows that preventing social isolation helps prevent dementia.”

If you don’t have much family and/or friends around, try contacting your local Age UK (ageuk.org.uk) and find out about community groups in your area.

CAN BRAIN TRAINING APPS HELP?

“Yes, some studies show an improvement, whilst others found brain training to be ineffective,” says Abbas Kanani, a pharmacist at Chemist Click.

“Brain training games are designed to test your memory with a range of different games and challenges. This may help to sharpen certain skills that can deteriorate with age, such as decision making, reaction time, and short-term memory.

“Overall, it is important to maintain a wellrounded, healthy lifestyle.

“Training games’ impact on the brain warrants further research to determine the long-term effect on cognitive functions across different groups (eg. elderly vs adults).”