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Playing music keeps brains sharp in old age

Musically inclined people over 40 may do better on cognitive tests

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Playing a musical instrument is linked to better brain health in older adults, including better memory and problem-solving capability, according to new British research published Sunday.



Analysis of the data of 1,000 people over age 40 enrolled in the 10-year PROTECT dementia study of 25,000 older adults found playing an instrument was associated with improved memory and superior executive function — the ability to solve complex tasks.

The PROTECT study is being run by Exeter University and Kings College London in partnership with the National Health Service.

The peer-reviewed study, results of which are published in the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry show that continuing to play an instrument or sing in a choir as people move into the later stages of their life confers even greater benefits, the researchers said in a news release.

The team compared study participants' engagement level with music throughout their lives to cognitive test results to figure out whether being hands-on with music helps slow cognitive decline that commonly affects older people.

Singing with other people was also linked to better brain health, but the scientists were unable to separate out the effect from the overall benefit conferred by being socially active.

Anne Corbett, an Exeter University professor of dementia research said that while the study was not the first to explore the impact of music on brain health, the PROTECT data had provided an unprecedented opportunity to research the link between cognitive performance and music in a large sample of older people.

“Overall, we think that being musical could be a way of harnessing the brain’s agility and resilience, known as cognitive reserve,” Corbett said.

“Although more research is needed to investigate this relationship, our findings indicate that promoting musical education would be a valuable part of public health initiatives to promote a protective lifestyle for brain health, as would encouraging older adults to return to music in later life.” she added.

Given the considerable evidence of the therapeutic benefits of “music-for-the-brain” type activities for dementia sufferers, Corbett said music training could be incorporated as part of a healthy aging package for older adults, enabling them to “proactively reduce their risk and to promote brain health.”

The paper cites the case study of Stuart Douglas, a 78-year-old lifelong accordion player who performs with the Cober Valley Accordion Band and the Cornish Division of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

The Scot says that after learning the instrument as a child growing up in a mining village in his native Fife he kept up with playing throughout his career as a police officer and into retirement.

“These days I still play regularly, and playing in the band also keeps my calendar full, as we often perform in public,” Douglas said.

“We regularly play at memory cafes so have seen the effect that our music has on people with memory loss and, as older musicians ourselves, we have no doubt that continuing with music into older age has played an important role in keeping our brains healthy.”

This study was funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research, Applied Research Collaboration South West Peninsula and NIHR Exeter Biomedical Research Center.

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