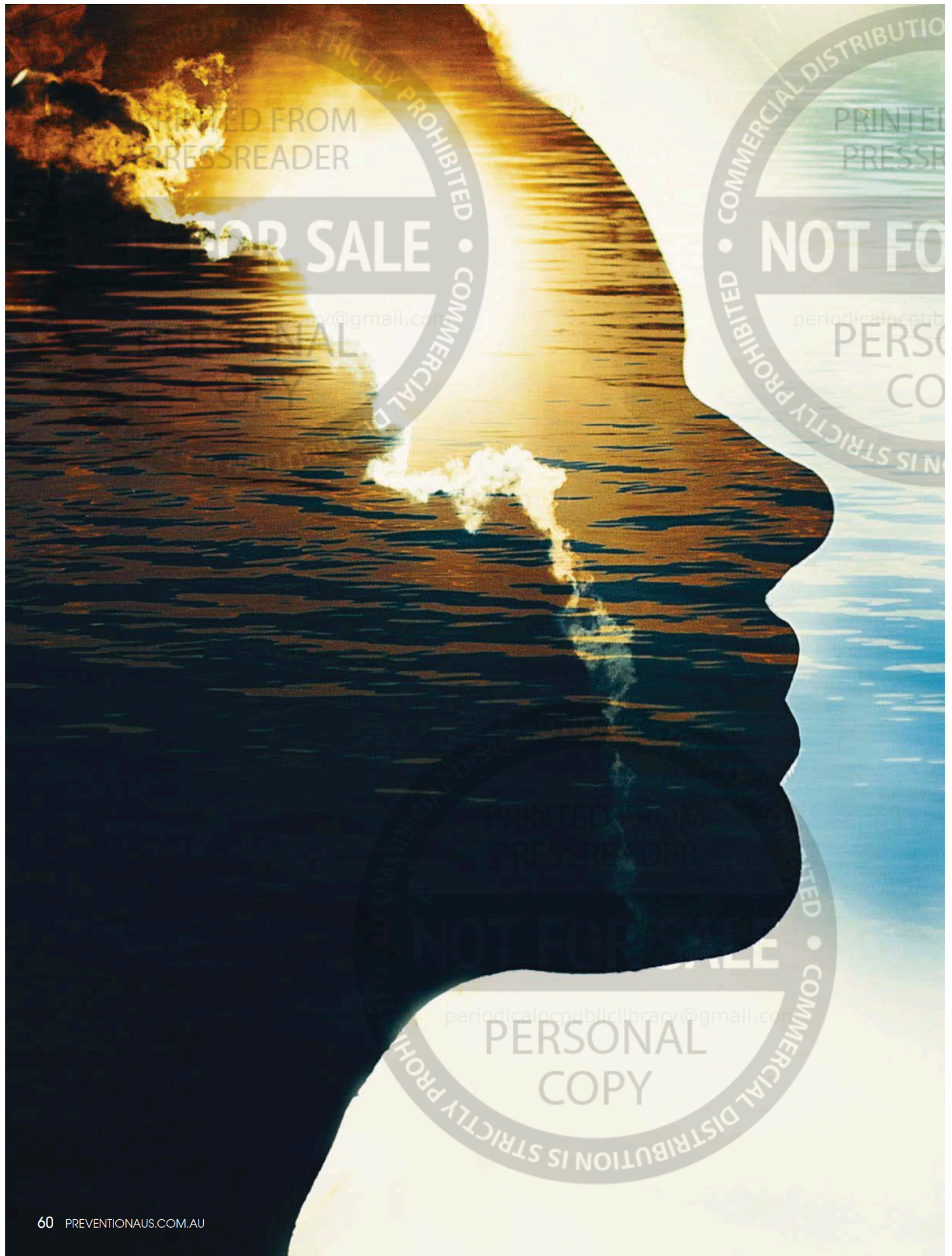


- Brain / Mind and body / Health self-care



CARING FOR YOUR BRAIN

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# A beautiful MIND

From standing more to calling a friend to sipping on berry smoothies, experts share their best ways to keep your brain healthier, sharper and younger for longer.

BY MICHELE O'CONNOR

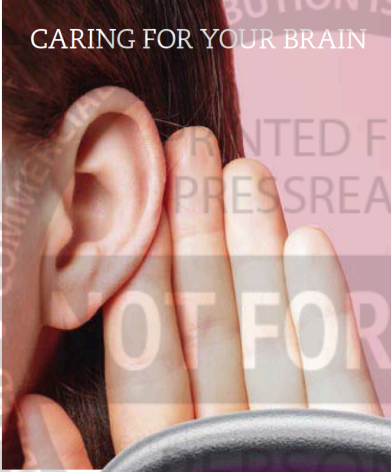
**L**ooking after your brain isn't just about remembering things, it's also about your feelings, reactions and simply enjoying life more, says Gill Livingston, a professor of psychiatry. "Your brain is the most precious part of the body and defines who you are," she adds.

Yet most of us devote more time to looking after our teeth than we do our brain, often taking our mental capacity for granted. It's true that our brain changes with age, starting from as early as our 20s. As we get older, we tend to become more forgetful and find learning new skills more difficult. But cognitive decline isn't an inevitable part of the ageing process, says neuroscience professor Dr Hana Burianová.

"The brain is plastic, so its structure and function changes and adapts throughout our lifetime," says Dr Burianová. In a nutshell, your lifestyle and habits can directly affect brain 'elasticity', either contributing to your dementia risk or protecting you against it. According to neuroscientist Dr Sabina Brennan, author of *100 Days To A Younger Brain*, your brain is a dynamic organ that not only influences your behaviour, but is also influenced by your behaviour. "Through daily brain-healthy choices, you'll gain a sense of rejuvenation and greater satisfaction with life," explains Dr Brennan.

Your actions right now can not only protect your brain in the long term, but also provide sounder sleep, more laughter, sharper thinking and improved memory. Here's how... ►

## CARING FOR YOUR BRAIN



# 1 Get your hearing tested

Hearing loss is one of the biggest modifiable risk factors against dementia, according to medical journal *The Lancet*. "Data for adults over 50 shows that people with hearing loss perform better in cognitive tasks if they use a hearing aid," says Anne Corbett, an associate professor of dementia research. Get your hearing checked every two years and trial hearing aids as soon as you detect you have an impairment.

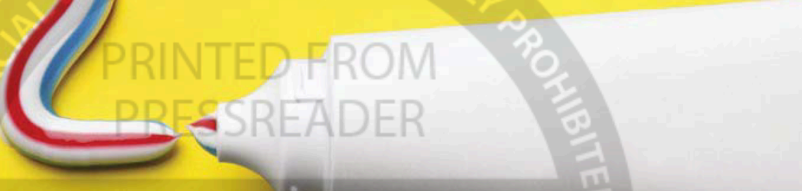


## BUILD STRENGTH

Incorporating hand weights, kettlebells and/or resistance bands into your fitness routine is not only great for your heart, bones and maintaining muscle mass, but it also boosts your brain health. Researchers from the University of Sydney found that six months of strength training (90 minutes a week spread over two or three sessions) can help protect brain areas that are especially vulnerable to Alzheimer's disease for up to one year later.

# 2 Make it 'new'

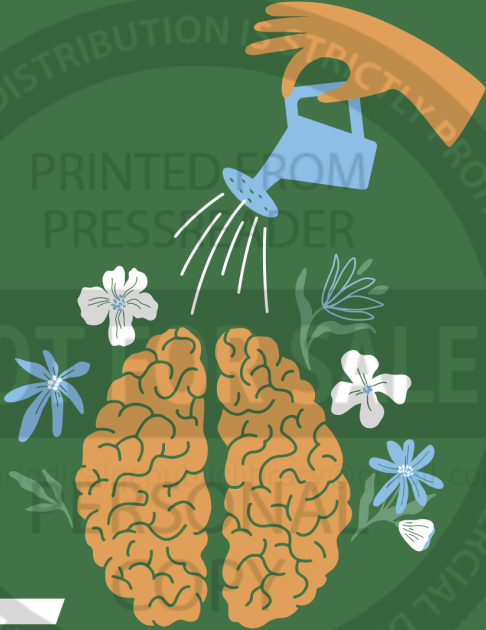
You know about aerobics, but what about 'neurobics'? These are brain-stimulating exercises performed when you try something new or do routine habits slightly differently. UK researchers found that the region in the midbrain responsible for regulating motivation and processing reward responds better to novelty than to the familiar. "Our brain loves new things," says Dr Burianová. "Even mundane tasks can be revamped. Take brushing your teeth, for instance: concentrate on the taste of the toothpaste, the sensation of the brush against your teeth and visualise cleaning away debris." Even better, try using your non-dominant hand to do a task. This requires the brain to pay closer attention to a normally unconscious behaviour.



# 4 Take brain breaks

It turns out that a wandering mind is actually good for the brain. According to Dr Burianová, just as your body needs to recover after vigorous exercise, your brain requires regular rest periods in the working day. "Take little breaks to deactivate the frontal cortex - even if it's just thinking about something else for 30 seconds," she suggests. Gaze out of the window and allow your mind to wander.





# 5 Keep learning

Your brain doesn't have limited capacity - it's an incredibly powerful muscle that'll grow the more you use it. "When you learn something new, your brain forms new connections and associations," explains Dr Burianová. "Think of it like rivulets forming in the ground after a fresh rain shower; the new information creates indentations and pathways in the soil of your mind." And you don't have to go back to school to reap the benefits. "Visit an exhibition, museum or gallery - or find out about another culture while you're on holiday," says Professor Livingston. It's all about living with increased curiosity and wonder. Speaking of which, neuroimaging studies suggest that expanding your vocabulary boosts cognitive ability, memory and intelligence, so aim to learn a new word each day.

# 7 FILL UP YOUR BOTTLE

Mild dehydration can impair cognitive performance, particularly when completing tasks involving attention and motor co-ordination. A UK study revealed that even mild dehydration is equivalent to being over the drink-driving limit in terms of driver errors. "Aim for about two litres a day - adding an extra glass of water for every alcoholic or caffeinated drink, hot days and very active lifestyles," advises neuroscience expert and certified therapist Laura Ellera.



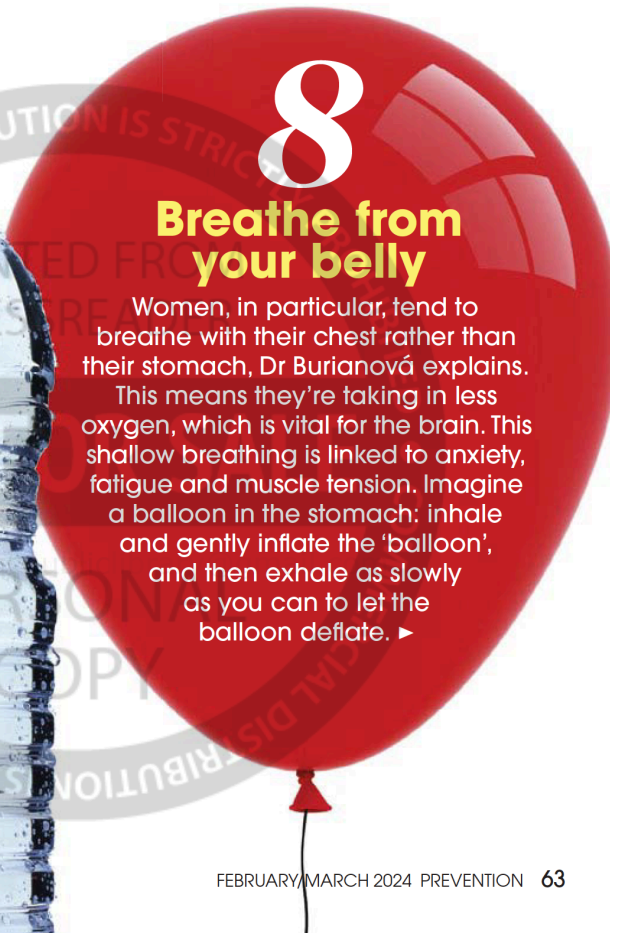
# 6 THINK ON YOUR FEET

Your brain performs better when you stand, according to a study published in *Psychological Science*. When volunteers were presented with conflicting stimuli, such as the word 'green' printed in blue ink, they were better able to process the information while standing because blood circulates more efficiently, meaning the brain absorbs more oxygen. Meanwhile, a report in the *International Journal Of Environmental Research And Public Health* found that standing desks increased concentration, which in turn led to an improvement in creative ability, troubleshooting skills and performance. Don't have one? Simply stand up when you need to solve a problem.



# 8 Breathe from your belly

Women, in particular, tend to breathe with their chest rather than their stomach, Dr Burianová explains. This means they're taking in less oxygen, which is vital for the brain. This shallow breathing is linked to anxiety, fatigue and muscle tension. Imagine a balloon in the stomach: inhale and gently inflate the 'balloon', and then exhale as slowly as you can to let the balloon deflate. ▶



CARING FOR YOUR BRAIN

# 9

## Sip green tea

In a study of 1000 Japanese older adults, those who drank the most green tea had the lowest odds of mental decline.



# 10

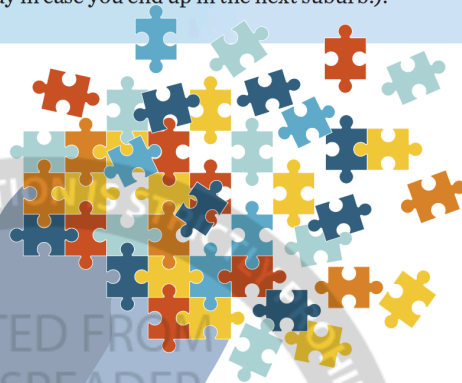
## USE A MAP

Drivers who rely on sat-navs restrict their brain's ability to hold memory and solve problems. In fact, researchers warn that the hippocampus – a major component of the brain that controls navigation – is the first to deteriorate in people with dementia. So, try looking at a map before your next unfamiliar journey (but keep the sat-nav handy in case you end up in the next suburb!).

# 11

## BECOME A BOOKWORM

Love getting stuck into a good book? Your brain loves it, too. Studies suggest regular readers have improved reasoning skills, vocabulary, concentration and critical thinking. A recent study using MRI brain scans to measure the impact of reading a novel found that, as tension built in the story, more and more areas of the brain lit up with activity. "Read a variety of books, including non-fiction, to use different parts of the brain," suggests Professor Livingston. "Also listen to audiobooks to 'read and walk' – both great brain activities."



# 12

## Challenge yourself

Love playing puzzle games on your phone? They could be doing your brain a world of good. Studies have shown that gamers not only experience improved memory and concentration, but also notice more general brain function benefits in their day-to-day activities. However, experts recommend that you get your fix the traditional way, via crosswords and puzzles, in order to avoid eye strain.

# 13 Increase your vitamin B intake

“Without enough vitamin B, your brain can’t make the chemicals you need for good mood, brain function and healthy sleep,” explains Dr Mike Dow, author of *The Brain Fog Fix*. Green veggies and beans are full of B vitamin folate, while organic eggs and fish are great sources of vitamin B12. Try a yeast extract spread on toast: it’s rich in B12 and regulates the delicate balance needed to maintain a healthy brain.



# 14 Take in the sunshine vitamin

Only 10 per cent of vitamin D comes from food sources; the rest is from sunlight – so make sure you get some rays (about 15 to 20 minutes should do it). Don’t forget to wear sun protection afterwards, though. A deficiency in this crucial vitamin is linked to poor memory function and low mood. However, a US report suggests that correcting vitamin D deficiency could prevent as many as 17 per cent of cases of dementia.

# 15 PRIORITISE FRIENDSHIPS

“Socialising supports brain plasticity,” says Dr Burianová, explaining that loneliness in older adults is linked to brain deterioration. Laughing with others cements bonding, reduces stress and raises levels of serotonin – a key neurotransmitter linked to mood. “Being alone is fine as long as you feel content,” she says. “Feeling lonely is very different.” Multigenerational friendships can help you maintain a youthful outlook on life, so don’t just mix with friends your own age. A friendship study involving 422 women aged 31 to 77 discovered that the larger and more varied a social network they had, the younger they felt.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ISTOCK

# 16

## Add berries to smoothies

Swedish researchers found that those who drank a mixture of antioxidant-rich strawberries, blackberries, raspberries and blueberries reported significantly better memory performance. It tastes delicious, too! 