- Mind and body



HOW CAN I BOOST MY BRAIN HEALTH?

This month our three wise women share holistic ways to keep your brain stronger for longer to support your cognitive function and mental wellbeing.

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PAULINE SAYS...

Pauline Cox is a functional nutritionist. Her latest book is *Hungry Woman: Eating For Good Health, Happiness + Hormones*. She runs health food store and café Sow and Arrow near Bristol (sowandarrow.com). Follow her at instagram.com/paulinejcox.

FOR WOMEN ESPECIALLY, maintaining cognitive health through midlife and beyond is not just about avoiding memory lapses; it's about preserving your independence, creativity, mood, and vitality. As your hormones shift, so too does your brain chemistry. Oestrogen, for example, plays a vital role in cognitive function, mood regulation, and even glucose metabolism in the brain. So, what can you do proactively, practically, and holistically to protect and nourish your brain as you age? Here are five ways to bulletproof your brain:

1 Balance blood sugar to protect brain energy

The female brain is highly sensitive to changes in blood sugar levels, with spikes and crashes triggering anxiety, brain fog, irritability, and fatigue. Over time, poor blood sugar control can increase the risk of cognitive decline.

Try the following:

- Prioritise protein with every meal.
- Include healthy fats like avocado, oily fish, olive oil, nuts, and seeds to both stabilise blood sugar as well as provide a whole range of vitamins and minerals.
- Reduce ultra-processed carbs, and focus on fibre-rich whole foods to keep glucose release slow and steady.

Better blood sugar control doesn't just protect your brain, it supports your mood, energy, sleep, weight and hormonal health.

2 Feed your brain the right fats

Your brain is made up of nearly 60 per cent fat and is reliant upon high-quality fats to function at its best. Omega-3s in particular are essential for brain health. They serve as vital ingredients for reducing inflammation, supporting neurotransmitter function, and protecting cognitive health. Ahiflower oil, found in Regenerative Omegas (£29.99, sowandarrow.com) is Mother Nature's richest source of omega 3, and it is also a great source of the anti-inflammatory omega-6 GLA, which supports skin health and hormone balance.

3 Nourish your gut to support your mind

There's a reason the gut is called the "second brain". A healthy gut microbiome supports the production of neurotransmitters like serotonin and GABA, which influence mood, memory, and focus. Rember that what's good for the gut… is good for the brain!

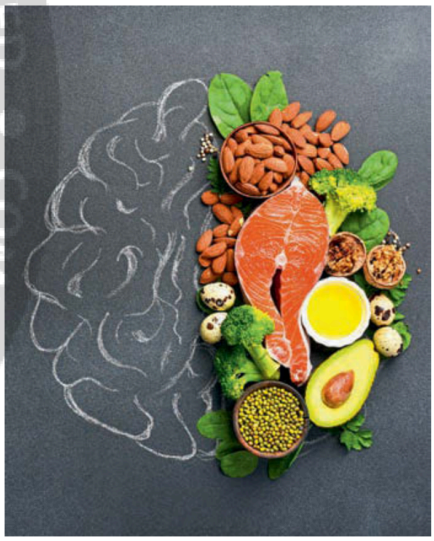
Try the following:

- Fermented foods – sauerkraut, kefir, kimchi.
- Prebiotic fibres – these feed good bacteria: onions, leeks, asparagus.
- Reduce sugar and processed foods – these feed inflammatory bacteria.

Your gut microbiome and stomach acidity change with age, particularly as you transition through menopause. Becoming conscious of the importance of a healthy gut for brain health, as well as a healthy digestive system for absorbing key nutrients needed for healthy brain function, is an important strategy in protecting your brain!

4 Protect against inflammation

One of the biggest drivers of cognitive decline, inflammation can increase in midlife. Women transitioning through menopause experience a drop in natural anti-inflammatory protection as oestrogen and progesterone levels fall. This is one reason why symptoms like brain fog, forgetfulness, and low mood can feel more intense during this time.



Try the following:

- Quality sleep – this is a non-negotiable for brain detox and memory processing.
- Regular movement – even gentle walking helps.
- Omega-3 rich foods and supplements such as fish oil.
- Antioxidant-rich foods – think berries, turmeric, leafy greens.

5 Prioritise sleep and stress reduction

Sleep is your brain's reset button. During deep sleep, the brain's glymphatic system clears out metabolic waste that can build up and affect cognition. For women, poor sleep during perimenopause and menopause is common and often linked to hormonal imbalances.

Try the following:

- Magnesium bisglycinate – take it before bed if suitable for you.
- Have a wind-down routine – aim for no screen time for 60–90 mins before sleep.
- Support progesterone – this calming hormone can be enhanced with wild yam supplementation.

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KATE SAYS...

Kate Rowe-Ham is a PT specialising in helping midlife women get strong and feel good. She's the founder of app *Owning Your Menopause* (owningyourmenopause.com) and a patron of the Menopause Mandate. Follow her at instagram.com/katerh_fitness.

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO maintain brain health as you get older is to stay physically active. And not just in a tick-box kind of way. I mean real, intentional movement that you genuinely enjoy and want to return to. I've seen it time and again in my community; when women start moving regularly, not only do they feel physically stronger but they also become mentally sharper, more precise, and more emotionally balanced.

Exercise plays a huge role in protecting the brain. When you move, you increase blood flow to the brain, which means more oxygen and nutrients are being delivered right where you need them. It's like giving your brain a daily power wash, flushing out the fog and boosting clarity. That mental sluggishness that can creep in during midlife? Movement is one of the most powerful ways to lift it.

And it's not just about feeling good in the moment. Regular exercise helps your brain stay flexible. What we call neuroplasticity is its ability to adapt, grow, and create new connections. So, when you're learning a new routine in the gym or mastering a new yoga pose, you're not just working your muscles, you're also rewiring your brain.

MENTALLY TOUGH

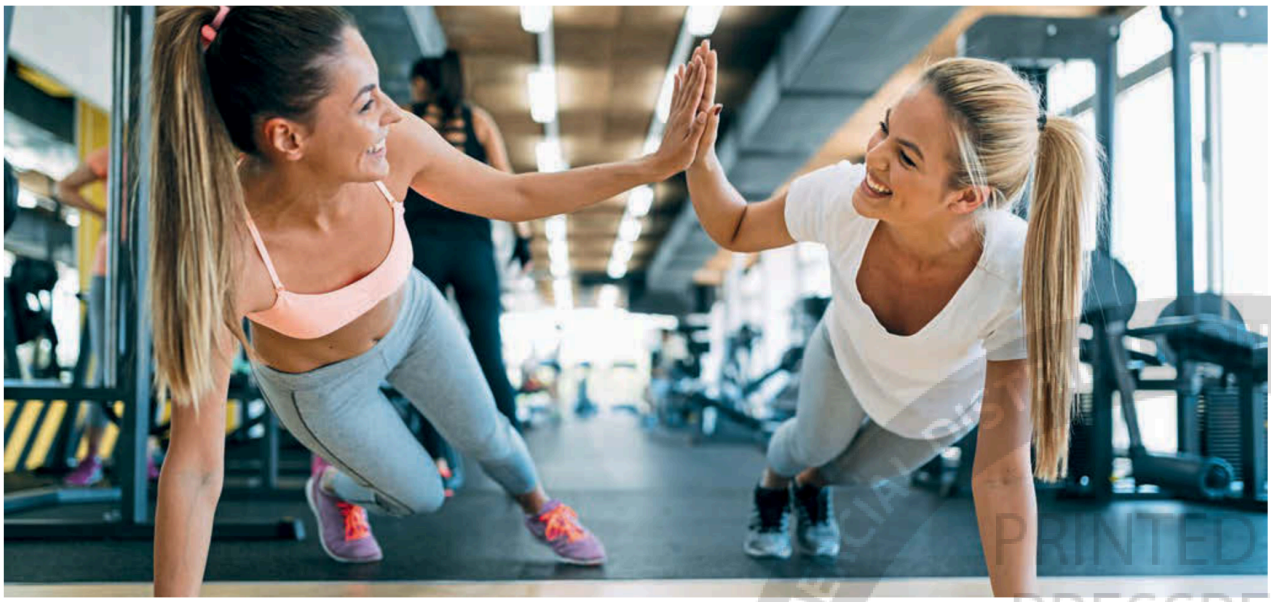
Strength training, in particular, is a game changer. Lifting weights challenges both your body and brain simultaneously. You're not only building muscle and protecting your bones, you're also improving coordination, balance, and focus. It's that extra layer of mental engagement, counting reps, focusing on your form, and feeling your body move with intention, that makes such a difference. Plus, there's a real confidence boost that comes from feeling physically strong, and that spills over into every area of life, including your mental wellbeing.

Movement also helps regulate stress hormones, which can get a bit out of balance during perimenopause and menopause. That fight or flight feeling, the anxiety that seems to come out of nowhere, eases when you move. I always say exercise is one of the most effective and accessible tools we have for mood support. The release of feel-good chemicals during and after a workout is nature's mental health booster.

And here's something else I love: research shows that active people have a lower risk of developing dementia. So, whether you're lifting weights or walking, you're future-proofing your body *and* your brain.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Keep it simple but consistent. Strength train two or three times a week using movements like squats, lunges, and presses that challenge your whole body. Add in daily movement such as walking, cycling, or dancing in the kitchen. And some balance, coordination, Pilates or yoga will help to reset your nervous system. The main thing is to move in ways that feel good and make you want to keep showing up. Your brain will thank you.



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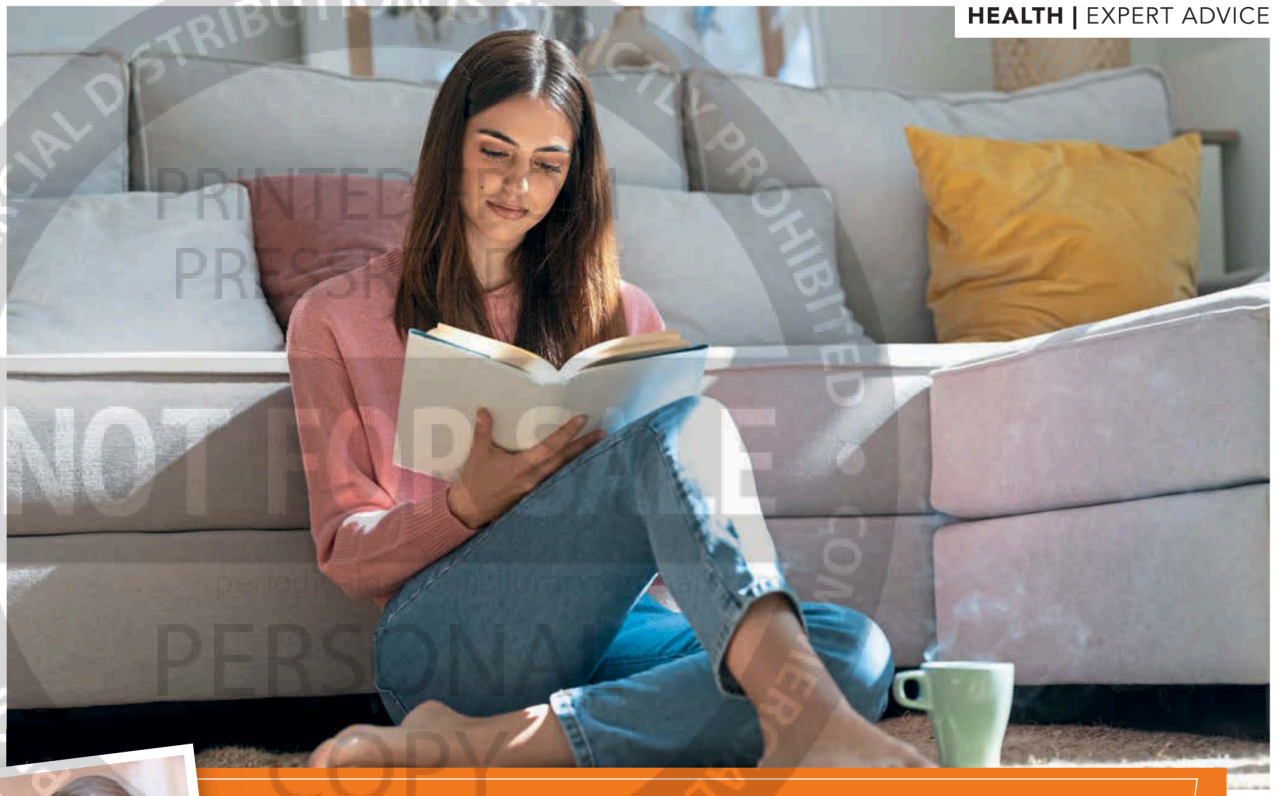



SUZY SAYS...

Suzy Reading is a chartered psychologist and creator of *The Little Box of Self-Care*. Suzy's coaching focuses on helping people integrate healthy habits to boost their mental, physical and emotional health. Find her at suzyreading.co.uk and at instagram.com/suzyreading.

WHEN WAS THE LAST time you encouraged a sense of playfulness in your day? Play is not just for kids and it most definitely keeps your brain agile and your mood buoyant. What kind of play resonates with you? Is it the creative kind where you might consider some writing, drawing, scrap booking or music making? Perhaps you'd prefer to engage some friendly company and play cards together. It could be as simple as doing a daily Wordle and comparing your scores with loved ones for the added benefit that connection brings.

Curiosity is a powerful skill that keeps us growing and open to new perspectives and experiences. Weave it into your day by using the prompt "I wonder…". When you come across something that you don't understand or find your interest piqued in knowing more, indulge that desire! Have a Google, listen to a podcast on it, pick up a book, take a peek at a course, or become skilled in asking questions to glean a little more information. "Tell me more about that" can be a beautiful way to gain a deeper appreciation during conversations. Our thirst for new experiences and insights keeps our brains active. Use it or lose it is real when it comes to brain health, so challenge yourself by making the commitment to being curious.

MIND MATTERS

Self-compassion is a non-negotiable in keeping your brain healthy. Staying anchored in it will help you feel courageous in trying new things or making peace with where familiar things might feel difficult – you're not alone in that experience. Develop a set of compassionate phrases to encourage you to keep nurturing your health. Remind yourself that you are capable and that you are resourceful. Be mindful of all the ways that you are learning and growing as a person. Take the opportunity regularly to pause and see how far you've come.

Self-compassion is not just something we think about, it is rooted in action – it is noticing suffering and being motivated to help yourself avoid it or alleviate it. It requires you to give yourself permission to take nurturing action. It makes much more sense to attend to the whisper of discomfort, than to wait for the shout of illness, injury, conflict or overwhelm. A simple way to develop your skills of self-compassion is to turn drinking water into a self check-in ritual. As you drink, place a hand on your heart and ask yourself "Where am I at and what do I need". Strategies to boost brain health, like feeding your brain and moving your body, require this kind of self-awareness, so let this habit be a domino in the right direction for all the other nourishing activity you want to take.

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