

Wellness and Your Brain: Keys to Cognitive Vitality

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The human brain controls everything we say, do or think. It uses twenty percent of our body's oxygen and blood supply. Within the brain there are thousands of miles of blood vessels and billions nerve cells. Its intricacies are stunning, far beyond anything most of us can imagine. And to keep this work of art as polished as possible, we need to eat right, exercise, keep mentally stimulated and manage our stress.

"It's very important that older adults stay physically active and mentally engaged," says neurologist Dr. Malcolm Stewart. His research has found, "these factors help reduce the changes often associated with aging and promote a higher function of the brain."

Dr. David Snowden outlined in his book, *Aging with Grace*, the lives of nuns who participated in his brain study. His findings include diet and exercise are keys to healthy aging and longevity, stress management and a positive attitude decreases the risk of age-related health problems and mental engagement reduces the risk of dementia.

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Dr. Stewart's and Snowden's studies have shown there are several key factors to cognitive vitality and specific behaviors that keep your brain healthy and your mind alert. These include:



- **Exercise is a key factor.** It increases blood and oxygen flow to the brain. Dr. Stewart says. "You get the runner's high; that's endorphins the body's reward system for exercise. I tell everybody they need to exercise to stay sharp."
- **Nutrition** feeds the brain. Eating well contributes to positive cognitive functioning and longevity. Avoid fast food, drink alcohol in moderation and strive for a Mediterranean diet rich in fresh fruits, vegetables and fish.
- **Mental engagement is exercise for your brain.** Read, try crossword puzzles and challenge yourself to learn new things. This will use multiple parts of the brain related to association, processing and higher reasoning and promote clearer thinking.
- **Manage your stress and keep a positive attitude.** Reduce stress by meditating or praying and have a sense of hope about the future. Listen to music. Reach out to others to make their lives better.

The good news is our brains can maintain its health and our minds are not destined to fail as we get older! Following simple guidelines for good cognitive health - mental and physical engagement, good nutrition and stress management - can lower your chances for Alzheimer's and memory loss. It is never too late to get started and remember there is truth to the adage - use it or lose it! This saying relates to your body and to your mind.