

You start to lose your memory sooner than you think. In your 20s, you begin to lose a few brain cells and your body gradually makes less of the chemicals your brain cells need to work. Over the decades, you might find you forget things once in awhile - like whether you locked the door or put the trash out at the curb. But significant memory loss isn't inevitable.

Research has found a few factors that accelerate the decline in brain function, such as poor circulation and out-of-control insulin levels. You can maintain a quick mind into your elder years, despite these age-related changes in your brain that make it more difficult for you to remember.

Research from UCLA shows that simple lifestyle changes - such as doing memory exercises, eating healthfully, being physically fit, and reducing stress - help you think more clearly and remember better. In this particular study, people following these healthy lifestyle habits had better memory and brain function in just 14 days.

Simple Ways TO IMPROVE Your Memory



What can you do to keep your mind sharp? Here are tips compiled from memory studies.

Expect the best. If you think you'll have a sharp memory into old age, the chances are better that you will. Older people who have sharp minds are great role models.

Exercise. Regular physical activity improves circulation and helps prevent some of the conditions that contribute to brain deterioration, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, inflammation, obesity, and diabetes. Studies show that regular exercise is one of the best things you can do to keep your memory strong.

The mental benefits of physical activity are impressive. Yet an animal study found that some of the benefits of exercise decreased within a few days of inactivity. Aim to be physically active for a minimum of 30 minutes on 5 or more days weekly - and keep it up for a lifetime.

Eat well. Feed your body and you feed your brain. Eating a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats is good for your overall health. But when it comes to mind-power, cruciferous vegetables (e.g., broccoli, cauliflower) and green leafy veggies (e.g., spinach, bok choy) trump them all, according to the Nurses' Health Study. Food containing antioxidants (e.g., berries, red beans, apples, red grapes) and omega-3 fatty acids (e.g., walnuts, soy or canola oil, salmon) all appear to promote healthy brain functioning, as do low-glycemic carbohydrates (e.g., whole grains).

Sleep. Sleeping 7-9 hours each night may improve your memory, according to recent studies conducted at the Harvard Medical School. Poor sleep quality and difficulty falling asleep seems to age your brain more quickly.

The Nurses' Health Study found that the more women walked in their 50s and 60s, the better their memory in their 70s. While walking just 90 minutes each week can make a difference - more is better. A study involving more than 2,200 elderly men found that those walking less than a ¼-mile each day were nearly twice as likely to develop dementia as men who walked at least 2 miles a day.

After examining the diets of more than 8,000 seniors, researchers found that regular consumption of omega-3 fatty acids reduced the risk of dementia by 60%. Eating fruits and vegetables daily decreases the risk by 30%.

A recent study found that, in addition to a good night's rest, a nap enhances memory when taken just after learning something new.

Relax. Stress – whether temporary or long-term – doesn't appear to physically damage your brain, but can make it more difficult for you to remember things. Walking or other physical activity is an excellent way to help your body relax.

Be social. Loneliness is associated with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Spend time with family and friends as much as possible. Plan parties, go out to eat, attend the symphony, and visit the zoo. Form a walking group and a book club. Volunteer in your church, community, or school.

Challenge yourself. Engage in mind-stimulating activities such as solving crossword or sudoku puzzles, reading non-fiction books, visiting museums, and even playing scrabble. Use your brain in new ways, often, and enjoy the benefits for a lifetime.

Keep learning. Taking college classes or learning to play an instrument helps keep your mind active and sharp. Learning something unusual or creative, such as a foreign language or how to juggle, might further strengthen your brain.

Double Up. Memorizing facts, favorite quotes, or scripture while you walk is an effective way to keep your brain and muscles strong.

Follow a routine. There's no need to keep track of routine information. Put your car keys and glasses in the same place so you don't have to think about where they are. Use a calendar to keep track of appointments. Do whatever makes it easier for you to organize thoughts and information.

Diversify. Use as many senses as you can to involve more parts of your brain in the memory process. Look, hear, taste, touch, and smell. Let's say you've just met someone. Study their face for unusual features and say their name aloud – "So Craig, what brought you

Serious memory problems affect your ability to carry out everyday life activities such as driving a car, shopping, or handling money. Signs of serious memory problems may include:

- Asking the same questions over and over again
- Becoming lost in places you know well
- Not being able to follow directions
- Getting very confused about time, people, and places
- Not taking care of yourself – eating poorly, not bathing, or being unsafe

If you are having any of these problems, see your doctor. It's important to find out what might be causing a serious memory problem. Your treatment depends on the cause of the problem.

to our small town?" Spell the name phonetically in your mind. Form a visual image related to the name (e.g., see Craig standing on a rocky mountain peak).

Create a hook. You can trigger a memory with a rhyme, an association, or with something unusual. Odors are famous for conjuring memories from the distant past – you can probably smell Grandma's freshly baked bread even now! If you meet someone named Merle who has curly hair, perhaps Curly Merly might help you remember his name.

Mnemonic (pronounced ni-'mä-nik). Mnemonics are creative ways such as songs or rhymes to help you remember things. They can take the form of acronyms – such as the classic "Every good boy does fine" to remember the musical notes E, G, B, D, and F on the lines of the treble clef. For older learners, a particularly helpful system is a story mnemonic – that is, a brief narrative in which each item cues you to remember the next one. Some people put important information to music – make up lyrics to a favorite song that include the needed information.

Break it down. It's easier to remember small pieces of information. If you need to remember a new phone number, for example, memorize the numbers in chunks (area code, first 3 numbers, last 4 numbers).

Link your list. You can remember a list better if you associate the items with something already etched in your mind. You can use the alphabet (e.g., Apples, Bread, Celery) or picture the items in unusual places at your home. For example, as you pull into your driveway you notice your front door is a loaf of bread. Apples are rolling down the entry stairs, which are made out of celery.

Focus. Sometimes you can't remember things – like what your spouse wanted you to buy at the store – because you weren't really paying attention. Next time, make a conscious effort to remember.

Picture it. You remember information more easily if you can "see" it. If you want to remember a grocery list, don't just picture bread, bananas, and toothpaste. That's too common and, therefore, easily forgotten. Instead, picture something outlandish, like your child eating a banana and toothpaste sandwich.

Sometimes memory problems indicate something more serious – a stroke, thyroid problems, Alzheimer's disease, dehydration, depression, or a reaction to a medication, for example. If you are concerned about your memory, or if you have a sudden or severe memory lapse, talk to your doctor immediately.

For more information, read *Understanding Memory Loss*, by the National Institute on Aging: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/UnderstandingMemoryLoss/>

