

Local

Don't forget to care for your brain power

By: Tara Maltman-Just

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Last week, I had the pleasure of speaking at the Alzheimer Society of Manitoba's annual Dementia Care Conference, a two-day program for health-care professionals serving those with dementia.

In speaking with several attendees after the presentation, they shared questions on supporting brain health, particularly memory, from early in adulthood.

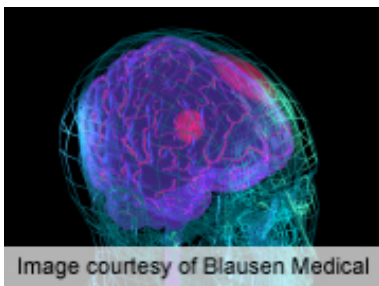


Image courtesy of Blausen Medical

Regardless of our age or season of life, we can all benefit from tips to boost our brain health and memory maintenance. And it doesn't need to take too much time out of your day.

Variety is the spice of life, you know. Your brain tends to agree. Keep those neural synapses active by changing up your routine. My favourite hint (and, dare I say, burgeoning fashion trend) is to wear your watch upside down twice a week. Keep things exciting by switching wrists as well. When you go to read your watch, your brain has to work a little differently to determine the time -- great brain exercise.

On the topic of exercise, don't underestimate the importance of physical fitness to the health of your body's supercomputer. Exercise of all kinds boosts blood flow, bringing more nutrients to the brain. We need these nutrients for memory and mood. One clinical study of a popular antidepressant showed exercise is just as effective for treating depression after three months and even more effective after

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10 months.

The best type of exercise is a combination of aerobic and co-ordination movements, followed by new learning. Exercise increases neurogenesis -- the development of new brain cells -- and literally increases the size of our memory centre, the hippocampus. However, with only physical activity and no additional intellectual stimulation, these new cells can die because they're not making new connections with other brain cells.

Instead of simply beefing up, consider walking around the block counterclockwise versus clockwise. Once you've mastered that, move on to walking backwards... although you might wish to buddy up the first few go-rounds. You can also try counting down from 100 by a specific number, by sevens, for example.

Nutrients are key for a sharp memory and mind. Omega-3 fatty acids maintain nerve cells and actually form the coating around our main memory conductors, called myelin sheaths. Supplementing with 1000 milligrams daily is a good starting point for many. We don't want to forget that substances such as alcohol and caffeine can deplete our body of vitamin C, B, magnesium and antioxidants, also dehydrating the brain and reducing blood flow, further restricting delivery of nutrients and oxygen. Keeping intake at one cup daily of each can minimize potential depletions.

Sleep is an area that should not be overlooked. Eight hours a night is recommended for everyone. You might be thinking "dream on" -- and that's exactly right. Studies have shown dreaming is important too. A decrease in only one hour of sleep affects our stress hormone, cortisol, and causes us to eat more and eat healthier. Studies have also demonstrated that chronic stress and elevated cortisol results in decreased memory and brain processing speed. Reducing stress can be important to your memory as well. Shopping therapy might be more than a slang phrase. And I firmly believe in practising what I preach.

The always friendly manager at one of my favourite Winnipeg retail locations shared some interesting news -- they found four wallets and three purses left behind after the time change! A healthy return compared to the usual 0 to one per week, she said. A connection with forgetfulness and impaired judgement after daylight saving time kicked in March 9? A question, in my mind, that doesn't need the question mark.

We can certainly remember these tips to improve our memory, or improve our memory to remember these tips. Perhaps Manitoba's leaders can also follow a tip from our western neighbour: Discontinue daylight saving time. Right now, we might be saving less than we think.

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