



## MAKING BRAIN-HEALTHY CHOICES

### Ask Your Pharmacist

All of our efforts at staying healthy seem to be focused on parts of our body from the neck down. However, the health of our brain is equally important in enjoying a better quality of life especially as you grow older. For example, keeping your mind active and your memory sharp is a key part of aging well. The good news is that memory and concentration do not have to diminish with age. We have as evidence an increasing number of remarkably creative individuals who have demonstrated the brain's wonderful capacity to function at an exceptional level at an advanced age: Claude Monet was 80 when he painted his famous series of water lilies; Sigmund Freud's most important work in psychoanalysis was done when he was in his 80s; and at 90 George Bernard Shaw wrote the play "Buoyant Billions."

While your brain may lose some agility as you get older - just like other parts of your body - poor nutrition, stress, toxic accumulation in the brain as well as inflammation and circulatory problems are the underlying causes of age-related mental deterioration. New research suggests that by challenging and engaging your brain you can help maintain a healthy brain as you age. The good news is that older people can learn new things as well as people who are years younger, they just require a little more time and effort.

#### *Use it or lose it*

Studies show that everyday intellectual stimulation can not only prevent mental deterioration, but can actually improve cognitive function. Like a muscle in your body, the less you use your brain, the less efficient it becomes. It's never too late to learn new skills and start new activities. Mentally stimulating activities strengthen brain cells and the connections between them, and may even create new nerve cells. Physical exercise can increase blood flow to the brain and encourage new brain cells. This may not only reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke, but may also protect against dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

This new interest in brain fitness is evidenced by the number of programs aimed at baby boomers anxious to stave off memory loss or dementia. Organizations like the AARP are offering brain health tips, and the Alzheimer's Association conducts hundreds of 'Maintain Your Brain Workshops'. Some health insurance companies have even begun offering 'Brain Fitness Camps' through customized software programs.

Websites such as HappyNeuron.com and MyBrainTrainer.com, are now marketed to those who wish to exercise their brains. The jury is still out on whether brain health programs are realistic and as to their actual effectiveness. However, in a National Institute on Aging study, people given at least 10 hours training in memory, reasoning, or processing speed skills showed improvement, which was retained five years later.

#### *Food for thought*

Needless to say, good brain health needs a constant and balanced flow of high quality nutrients. Three meals and two snacks every day with a protein source will help to stabilize blood sugar levels. Eating four or more daily servings of whole grains and at least five portions of fruits and vegetables a day is essential at any age, but becomes all the more important as we age. Research suggests that high cholesterol may contribute to stroke and brain cell damage. Therefore, a low fat, low cholesterol diet is advisable. Also, there is growing evidence that a diet rich in dark vegetables and fruits, which contain antioxidants, may help protect brain cells. Limit your coffee intake to one cup a day and consider switching to antioxidant-rich green tea or herbal teas.

Amino acids like phenylalanine and tyrosine support metabolism in brain cells. These nutrients make us feel alert and energetic. Glutathione can help the brain combat environmental pollution, as do antioxidant vitamins like vitamins A, C, and E. These antioxidants also help to eliminate free radicals in the brain. Additionally, B vitamins help keep brain metabolism normal. Among the most important brain nutrients are essential fatty acids (EFAs), which are necessary for brain function. Omega-3 fatty acids from cold-water fish, ground

for your best health

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# BRAIN-HEALTHY CHOICES (continued)

walnuts, pumpkin seed and flax seed, along with mono-unsaturates from olive, avocado, and canola oils are particularly good sources of EFAs.

Studies have shown that while most Americans consume more than enough food, these foods often lack the nutrients that our bodies need. In addition, older Americans may face several unique obstacles in obtaining proper nutrition from food.

*Social Isolation* - Widowed women who prepared meals for their husbands and family may lose all interest in cooking; men may have this same problem, or may not know how to prepare healthy meals.

*Special Diets* - Restricted diets, such as low-sodium or low-cholesterol, often require more planning and preparation; this level of commitment may discourage some patients.

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*Physical Problems* - Missing teeth, digestive problems such as chronic constipation, and numerous other conditions may interfere with an older person's ability to eat a well-balanced diet.

*Lack of Money* - Fresh produce and other healthy foods often cost more than canned or packaged foods, leading many older Americans to purchase high-sodium, processed products.

Our pharmacist will be happy to assess your diet for these common pitfalls and suggest a few simple changes. Supplementation may also help to replace some of the nutrients your diet lacks. Your medicines may even be causing nutritional depletions that you don't know about. Our pharmacist will consult with you to find an optimal supplementation program that fits your individual needs.

## *What should I know before buying a supplement?*

Consultation with a pharmacist becomes incredibly important for older patients who may be taking multiple prescription medications, some of which could be causing depletions or may potentially interact with certain supplements.

## *Supplements often recommended for brain health include:*

*Ginkgo Biloba* is thought to improve blood flow to the brain by dilating blood vessels and thinning the blood. (If you take aspirin or warfarin, please consult your doctor or pharmacist before taking it.)

*Ginseng* has been shown to improve memory and mental well-being. Ginsenosides found in Ginseng are known to affect biochemical

processes within the brain and protect against the adverse effects of stress.

*Phosphatidylserine* is essential for brain health and in trials has reduced memory loss and improved mood and brain power.

*Vitamins, Minerals, and Trace Elements* are all important, but *magnesium, calcium, vitamins A, C, E, B-complex, and trace minerals* are crucial since it is difficult to get optimal amounts in your diet.

*Antioxidant vitamins A & E, coenzyme Q10, and selenium* are also essential to brain health.

*Essential Fatty Acids* (omega-3 and omega-6) are thought to have a considerable effect on memory, mood, learning, and behavior.