

Stay Mentally Sharp By Working Brain

Older adults who frequently engage in mentally stimulating activities are 2.6 times less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and dementia than those who are cognitively inactive, according to a news release from the American Academy of Neurology about the Rush University Memory and Aging Project. Research is increasingly showing that aging doesn't automatically result in a steady erosion of brain cells. Rather, older adults who work their brains can develop new connections between brain cells. Research news from the Mayo Clinic indicates that older adults who work their brains can develop these new connections between brain cells by performing brain-stimulating activities. So give yourself a "brain workout" and challenge your mind with a wide variety of new activities. The July issue of Mayo Clinic Health Letter offers these suggestions to stimulate the mind:

Working the left brain -- Language, number and reasoning activities are often considered left-brain activities. Reading, writing, learning a new language, completing number or work games, balancing a checkbook without a calculator and fixing broken objects are left-brain activities.

Working the right brain -- Music, art and using the imagination are considered right-brain activities. Options to stimulate this side include reviving a musical talent, singing in a choir, knitting, quilting or taking art classes.

Breaking a routine -- Long-familiar daily routines can become so ingrained that little thought is required. When one breaks up routines, meets a new person, learns a skill or takes a different route to the store, the brain is engaged.

Remembering or memorization -- Brain-building ideas include memorizing phone numbers, the words to a poem or people's names.

Meditation -- Studies have shown that meditation activates the parts of the brain associated with happiness and contentment and reduces stress and anxiety. This effect can occur even in those new to meditation, and grows more robust with practice.

Engaging in social activity -- Engaging in conversation or activity with a wide variety of people -- family, friends or strangers -- can be one of the most complex and varied tasks that the mind undertakes. Social engagement has been linked in many studies to the reduction of mental decline.