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Senior living: How older adults can help keep their brains healthy while aging

By **CONTRIBUTING WRITER** | |

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As older adults age, the percentage of seniors with Alzheimer’s disease, the most common cause of dementia, increases.

That’s according to the 2022 Alzheimer’s Disease Facts and Figures report. That document from the nonprofit Alzheimer’s Association — subtitled, “Special Report, More Than Normal Aging: Understanding Mild Cognitive Impairment” — said that an estimated 6.5 million Americans who are at least 65 years old were living with Alzheimer’s dementia this year. Alzheimer’s dementia affects 5% of people ages 65 to 74, 13.1% of people ages 75 to 84 and 33.2% of people ages 85 and older.





Dung Trinh, M.D., chief medical officer, Irvine Clinical Research, MemorialCare physician, Alzheimer's Orange County physician educator (Photo courtesy of MemorialCare)

While there is not one all-encompassing test to diagnose Alzheimer's disease, your doctor can evaluate your medical history and symptoms and may refer you for additional testing. This may include neurological evaluations to assess your memory, problem-solving skills and reflexes; neuropsychological testing to assess your reasoning, language and thinking skills; and brain scans to check for possible signs of stroke, tumors, bleeding; or a PET scan to assess brain function.

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease.

But there are medications to help hinder its progression. Cholinesterase inhibitors may be prescribed for mild-to-moderate symptoms. Cholinesterase inhibitors block the normal breakdown of acetylcholine, a type of chemical messenger that plays an important role in the central and peripheral nervous system.

Last year, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Aduhelm (The brand name for aducanumab) for Alzheimer's disease. The new medicine, for patients with mild cognitive impairment or dementia, is the first to attack clumps of a toxic protein (known as beta-amyloid plaques) believed to destroy neurons in the brain, leading to cognitive decline, according to the National Council on Aging. While this medication has been shown to break down the amyloid plaques, it is not a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

There are also ways to help keep your brain in good shape. If you are a senior and feel your memory can use some help, these three practices can help stimulate your brain:

First, stay active.

Brain diseases, including Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, are closely linked to heart health, according to a 2022 American Heart Association report. The report also noted the role of high blood pressure in cognitive decline and the association of diabetes with an increased risk of



Adults 65 years and older should try to get the equivalent of 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise, such as walking briskly five days a week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Increased physical activity can help with blood flow to the brain, can help with sleep and can help reduce the risk of other ailments. In fact, the CDC says, the impact on brain health after moderate-to-vigorous exercise can be immediate and help thinking, learning and judgment.

And speaking of sleep, make sure you get some.

Good sleep can't be underestimated. It's critical to keeping your brain healthy and running optimally.

During sleep, according to researchers at Boston University, a liquid called cerebrospinal fluid will wash through your brain in pulsing, slow waves that may help flush out memory-impairing proteins from the brain. With age, people often have fewer slow waves, which can lead to an accumulation of toxic proteins and a decline in memory. Sleep helps us store memories and replenish ourselves to increase learning function. Sleep is also necessary for long memory formation, optimal immune function and various regenerative functions, including improved emotional well-being.

With insomnia being the most common sleep problem in adults who are 60 and older, here are some tips to help you get a good night's sleep:

- Set a regular sleep schedule. Develop a routine that includes relaxation before going to bed.
- Avoid electronic back-lit devices such as tablets, cell phones and computers before sleep. These devices, according to the Sleep Foundation, produce blue light, which has been shown to decrease sleepiness and the amount of time you spend in slow-wave and rapid-eye movement (REM) sleep; both are important for cognitive functioning.
- Keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature and try to avoid large meals before bedtime.

And lastly, exercise your brain.

Think of your brain as another important part of the body that needs regular



Working on a jigsaw puzzle, for example, can activate both the right (creative) and left (logical) sides of the brain and reinforces neural connections between the two sides.

By doing moderate exercise, getting good sleep and exercising your brain regularly, you can help keep your brain stimulated, healthy and happy as you age.

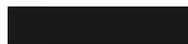
Dr. Dung Trinh is the chief medical officer for Irvine Clinical Research, a MemorialCare physician, Alzheimer's Orange County physician educator and a medical missionary with TongueOut Medical Missions. He is also a keynote speaker, best-selling author, and host of "Health Talks with Dr. Trinh," which can be heard weekly on OC Talk Radio. He is deeply involved in all aspects of Alzheimer's care, including clinical trials.

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