

Use It or Lose It: Maintaining Optimal Brain Function

Often times, people believe that their cognitive future has already been decided through hereditary components or fate. They believe that nothing can be done to affect whether or not they will encounter cognitive challenges as they age. However, various pieces of research suggest that a brain that remains active and well cared for may have the best chance at remaining healthy through life's journey. Here are some tips that may prove beneficial to the brain throughout life:

- **Maximize educational opportunities when young.** If your chance to do this has been missed, then continuing to learn as an adult, through formal course work or through self-study, may still be very beneficial.
- **Exercise the body.** Lower weight, lower cholesterol levels, lower sugar levels and better cardiovascular health may potentially decrease the risk of developing some types of dementia.
- **Exercise the brain.** Challenge your brain not only with cognitive tasks you enjoy and that may be easier to you, but also be sure to try tasks and brain puzzles that might not be quite as easy. This may be the best way to truly help your brain develop a "cognitive reserve."
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Diets that are rich in antioxidants, low in fat, and high in Omega-3s, have been mentioned as being brain-healthy.
- **Socialize.** Human beings are social creatures. As such, we tend to thrive on contact with one another. Being sure that we don't isolate ourselves as we get older, and become less mobile can be important in keeping our brains in top shape.
- **Do something out of the ordinary.** Our brains thrive on novel experiences, so travel to a new place, take a different route home, or brush your teeth with the other hand. Try anything that is different from what you do on a regular basis! It will stimulate your brain, and possibly keep it healthier.
- **Reduce stress.** A theory called the "Stress Diathesis" model of dementia development suggests that too much stress experienced over too long of a time period may increase one's risk of developing dementia later in life. So, if you can't avoid stress, be certain to develop some effective stress-reducing strategies for yourself. Your brain may thank you for it in the long run!