

Steps for a Healthy Brain



Your brain is vital for thinking, remembering, and living well as you age. You can take action to help protect and strengthen your brain. These steps outline activities and habits to support brain health.

Step 1: Make Healthy Daily Habits a Priority

- **Do not smoke.** Quitting smoking significantly reduces your risk of dementia.
- **Limit alcohol** consumption.
- Aim for **7 or more hours of sleep** each night. Good sleep helps your brain clear waste and process memories.
- **Protect your head** from injuries. Wear protective gear when needed and be careful to avoid falls.

Step 2: Move Your Body (Exercise is Key!)

- Exercise is the **most effective tool** for supporting brain health. It helps grow new brain cells and connections, improves blood flow, and reduces inflammation.
- Aim for at least **3 hours of exercise per week**. This can reduce your risk of death by 50%.
- Mix up your exercise types:
 - **1 hour of strength training** (like lifting weights, resistance bands, or bodyweight exercises).
 - **1 hour of Zone 2 cardio** (like brisk walking, light jogging, or moderate cycling – where you can talk but it's uncomfortable).
 - **1 hour of high-intensity coordinated movement** (like dancing, shadowboxing, or sports drills). This challenges your brain more than just cardio.
- Start small if you are new to exercise (even 10-15 minutes a session helps) and focus on consistency.

Step 3: Engage Your Mind Often

- Mentally stimulating activities build **cognitive reserve**, making your brain more resilient.
- Aim to **learn new things** regularly.
- Try activities like **learning a new skill** (instrument, language), doing **puzzles** (Sudoku, crosswords), or playing **strategy games** (chess).
- **Talk with friends and family** regularly (social engagement).
- Even just **10 minutes a day** of cognitive activity helps.
- Consider combining physical and mental challenges, I call it dual tasking in class and it can be other things like learning a new dance routine.

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Step 4: Nourish Your Brain Through Diet and Hydration

- What you eat affects your brain health later.
- Focus on nutrient-rich, anti-inflammatory foods. Diets like the **Mediterranean or MIND diet** can lower Alzheimer's risk by up to 50%.
- Eat foods with healthy fats (fish, nuts, olive oil), berries (like blueberries), and leafy greens (like spinach).
- **Drink enough water** daily.
- Eating healthy and managing your weight is important, as midlife obesity can double the risk of Alzheimer's.

Step 5: Manage Other Health Factors

- **Control your blood pressure.** High blood pressure harms blood vessels in the brain. Aim for a systolic pressure around 120 mm Hg if possible.
- If you have diabetes, **manage your blood sugar levels.** High sugar is bad for your brain. Exercise and diet are key for management.
- Manage your **lipid levels** (cholesterol and triglycerides). High levels can affect blood flow and inflammation in the brain.
- **Get your hearing checked.** Hearing loss makes your brain work harder and is linked to a higher risk of dementia. Use hearing aids if they help you. Protect your ears from loud noise.
- **Take care of your mouth and teeth.** Brush twice a day (electric toothbrushes are effective) and floss daily. See your dentist regularly. Gum disease may be linked to brain problems.

Step 6: Consider Other Supportive Activities (Optional)

- Regular **sauna use** (4-7 times per week) is linked to a potential 50% lower risk of Alzheimer's. Using a sauna 9-12 times a month may lower dementia risk by 24%. (Ask your doctor first, especially if you have heart issues).
- Consider discussing **supplements** with your doctor. Some like Omega-3, Vitamin D, and B vitamins may support brain health, but they don't replace a healthy diet.

Disclaimer: The information provided in this handout is inspired by The Drive Podcast by Peter Attia, specifically Episodes #251, which cover topics that may extend beyond traditional physical therapy practice. Patients are encouraged to listen to the podcast for a deeper understanding. Matt Pechacek, PT, cannot be held liable for decisions made based on this information.