

Women's Health Study

Update

Preventing Memory Loss

Memory loss can be such a frustrating aspect of aging that of course we want to do what we can to keep our minds sharp. Although genetic factors—which we cannot control—affect a person's susceptibility to cognitive decline, scientific research conducted over the last three decades has begun to identify strategies that may help to reduce our risk. While research is still ongoing, here are some strategies currently endorsed by the Alzheimer's Association* that may help to lower the risk of cognitive decline and dementia. As you look through the list, you may notice that many of the recommendations echo those for good heart health—and that's no coincidence. The concept of “what's good for the heart is also good for the brain” emerged early on and has been consistently supported by cognitive research.

Make moderate-intensity physical activity a habit. Aim for 150 minutes per week of moderate activity such as walking, biking, heavy duty housecleaning, and gardening or 75 minutes per week of more vigorous activity such as jogging and hiking or an equivalent combination of activities of both intensities. In one long-term study of 18,000 female nurses aged 70-81 years, women who were the most physically active appeared to shave 3 years off their cognitive age compared with physically inactive women.

Eat a healthy diet that emphasizes vegetables, fresh fruits, and whole grains; includes fish, beans, nuts, poultry,

low-fat dairy products, and oils rich in unsaturated fats (such as canola or olive oil); and *limits* sweets, sugary beverages, and red meats. Well-known examples of this dietary pattern are the Mediterranean and the DASH diets.

Engage in cognitively stimulating or challenging activities such as reading; playing strategy games such as bridge, chess, and Scrabble; memorizing poetry, geographical facts (for example, state capitals), or the like; solving crossword or jigsaw puzzles; learning a foreign language; practicing a musical instrument; trying new recipes; or taking classes at a local college or community center. In a randomized trial among 2,832 older adults, those who received as few as ten 60- to 75-minute sessions of mental training not only experienced immediate improvement in their cognitive functioning in daily activities, but also continued to show benefits 10 years later compared with control subjects.

Don't smoke. People who have never smoked or who have quit smoking appear to be 30% less likely to experience cognitive decline than current smokers.

Avoid head injuries. Wear a seat belt when in the car, use a helmet when on a bike, and take precautions to prevent falls, such as doing balance and coordination exercises (for example, yoga or tai chi) and making sure that your home is well lit and free of stumble-inducing obstacles. Nightlights or bedside flashlights are useful for middle-of-the-night trips to the bathroom.

“Although genetic factors affect susceptibility to cognitive decline, research has begun to identify strategies that may help to reduce our risk.”

Take care of your mental health. Seek treatment for symptoms of depression or anxiety, and try to reduce stress. Stress triggers our adrenal glands to release cortisol, a stress hormone that, at chronically high levels, negatively affects the brain.

Get a good night's sleep. Seek treatment for conditions that interfere with quality sleep, such as insomnia or sleep apnea.

Avoid medical conditions that raise risk of cardiovascular disease, including diabetes and the metabolic syndrome, a cluster of symptoms that includes abdominal obesity (belly fat), high triglycerides, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and low HDL (“good”) cholesterol.

Maintain strong social connections to family and friends. Although cognitive researchers disagree on the importance of this strategy, some data suggest that people who are socially engaged may be less likely to experience cognitive decline than those who are socially isolated. This may be in part because isolated individuals have fewer opportunities for cognitively stimulating conversations or activities.

*Alzheimer's Association. Lifestyle changes help reduce risk of cognitive decline, June 1, 2015.

WHS – Snapshots and Stories



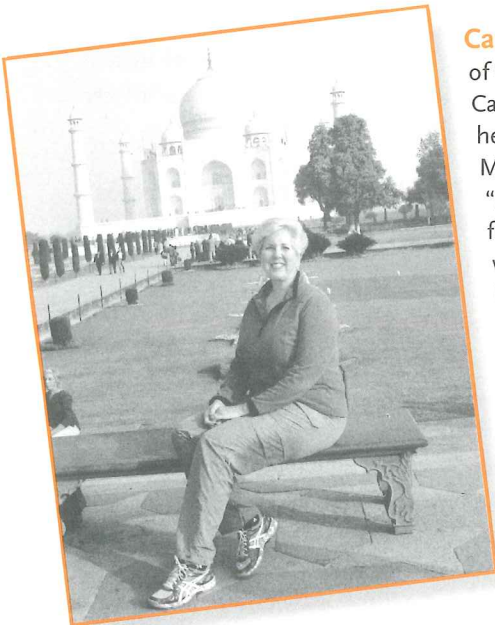
Mary Jo M., RN, of San Francisco, California, writes, “After forty-nine years of working as a nurse at the University of California Medical Center, I retired this past year. In 2007, when I recovered from a stroke, I decided to do all of the wonderful things life has to offer. At the age of 71, here I am rappelling off Table Mountain in Johannesburg, South Africa. Life is good!”



Alida C., RN, of Santa Cruz, California, jumped three times—at ages 67, 69 and 70—into the San Francisco Bay and swam from Alcatraz Island to Aquatic Park. Water temperatures in San Francisco Bay usually hover around sixty degrees, seas can be choppy and currents strong. If that were not enough, Alida adds, “On each swim, I was the oldest woman to be in the ‘skins’ category (no wet suit). It was wonderful!”



Janet S., RN, of Mims, Florida, writes, “You want pictures? Well, this is me at the bowling alley on Halloween before my 90th birthday last year. I still bowl in the league, I play bridge and I exercise regularly.”

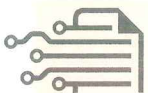


Caryl F., RD, of Grass Valley, California, seen here at the Taj Mahal, writes, “I just got back from a three week tour of Northern India and Nepal. It was an adventure tour which included a boat ride along the Ganges River. I returned home on my 70th birthday.

What a way to celebrate!”



Carol M., RN, of Port Orange, Florida, celebrated her 70th birthday on an Alaskan cruise. Highlights of the cruise were a zipline adventure in Ketchikan and a flyover of Denali. The zipline tour included eight “zips” and three “sky” suspension bridges. “It was exhilarating,” said Carol. The feat surprised her as well as her co-workers. In July, Carol attended her 50th nursing school reunion and notes, “I worked just six months shy of those fifty years.”



Electronic Forms Are Here!

The Women’s Health Study now has an on-line option for the annual health survey. 9000 participants took advantage of this e- form in 2015. If you have provided us with an e-mail address, we will email you the e-form in April. If you do not use the e-form option, we will also mail you the questionnaire via the USPS as usual. Remember to visit the WHS website for featured publications and the latest study results.

<http://whs.bwh.harvard.edu>

A call for photos

We always welcome your photos and stories and believe that WHS participants enjoy learning about each other. Although we are not able to publish all photos we receive, we plan to continue featuring as many dedicated participants as possible in future newsletters. Please send an electronic photo or a high-quality film, along with a brief note describing the photo, to: Women’s Health Study 900 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215 or to our email address: whs@partners.org

