

Eight Resolutions for a Brain-Healthy New Year

Determined to drop a few pounds, eat right, or get fit after all the holiday festivities? Those New Year resolutions may be good for more than just your body. Recent studies continue to point to the benefits of an active, heart-healthy lifestyle to help keep the mind sharp and alert. While there are many factors that we can't control, such as the genes we inherit, a few simple steps may even help to prevent Alzheimer's disease years down the road.

1. Keep on exercising. Exercise is beneficial at any age, not just for the heart and muscles but for the brain as well. Doctors in Scotland who examined 460 men and women who had been participants in a long-running national survey found that, as a group, the more physically robust an individual was in old age, the more likely he or she was to have an intact memory.
2. Eat a heart-healthy diet. A Mediterranean-style diet may be good not just for the heart but for the brain as well. Doctors at Columbia University in New York found that seniors who ate plenty of fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereals, olive oil, and fish; moderate amounts of wine; and little red meat or high-fat dairy products had a lower risk of getting Alzheimer's disease.
3. Eat your fish. Do what the Scandinavians do: Eat fish for the New Year. Recent findings from the large and ongoing Framingham Heart Study found that people with high levels of a fatty acid known as DHA, a "good" fat found in fish, may have a lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.
4. Drink juice. Older men and women who drank fruit and vegetable juices more than three times a week were 76 percent less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than those who drank juices less than once a week, a new study found. Researchers point to disease-fighting substances called polyphenols that are naturally found in fruits and vegetables as a possible source of protection.
5. Turn off the TV. Watching too much television not only keeps you on the couch; it may also dull the brain. A recent survey from Australia found that men and women who reported watching less than an hour a day of TV performed better in numerous memory tasks, including remembering items on a shopping list, recalling names and faces and people's occupations, and long-term memory skills.
6. Try computer games. More and more senior centers are adding computer games and other mental challenges to the roster of daily activities. One recent study found that men and women with Alzheimer's disease benefited from computer-based "games" designed to provide mental stimulation and enhance brain activity. The findings provide more evidence that mental challenges, such as doing crossword or Sudoku puzzles, solving brain teasers, or playing a musical instrument, can provide a mental boost, regardless of age or health.
7. Seek counseling. Spouses who cared for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease were much less likely to place their partner in a nursing home if they received targeted counseling and support. These findings, from a long-running study led by Dr. Mary Mittelman and colleagues at the Silberstein Institute at the New York University School of Medicine, underline the importance of counseling and social support for any family touched by Alzheimer's disease.
8. Finally, relax. Scientists at the University of California at Irvine found that mice injected with a drug that mimics stress in people had high levels of beta-amyloid, a toxic protein that builds up in the brains of those with Alzheimer's disease. The findings suggest that managing stress may be important parts of an Alzheimer's care plan.

About the Author

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