



BRAIN BUF

WORKOUTS FOR A KEEN INTELLECT

Normal, cognitive changes as you age are completely normal. This may include mild cognitive impairment, which is quite common in humans after midlife.

Usually this "dulling of the mind" starts around middle age. Since the average person lives to about 80 years old, this means that if you're 40, you are middle age. Even if you are nowhere near 40 right now, this age comes sooner than you think because time passes very fast while you're living it.

Working on keeping your mind sharp as you age can and should start from a young age. The younger you start, the better. However, even if you're over middle age right now, and even if you feel as if you have less mental dexterity than when you were younger, you can still implement what you will read in the pages that follow. If you do, you may avoid suffering too much decline, keeping your mind as sharp as possible and even improving where you can.

The Importance of Keeping Your Mind Sharp as You Age

It's normal to experience changes in your brain throughout your life. As you go through middle age and beyond, your brain will slowly shrink. This is all completely normal and while it sounds frightening, you don't have to be scared. With the right plan, you can - if you work on it - actually grow your brain even if it's already started shrinking.

Keep Your Independence Longer

If you can take care of yourself and remember to pay your bills, turn off the stove, and that type of thing, you will be able to be independent a lot longer than if you can't do those things. Working on improving your memory and brain function now, even if you have no mental or cognitive decline at all, will ensure that you will put it off even longer.

Ward off Dementia

Even though a large percentage of people over 70 have some form of dementia, you can certainly lessen the effects by working on your mental and physical health. Eating right, keeping your mind sharp by reading, doing new things, and living an active life is your best defense against any illness and costs less than medical intervention.

Improve Your Memory

Being able to remember to take your meds, or even remember what day it is, is an important factor in being able to live on your own. If you cannot remember what day it is, it's hard to remember to pay your light bill or buy the right amount of food to eat. Don't worry, though; even if you have a hard time remembering things now, you can learn methods to make it easier.

Experience Better Health in General

Taking care of your brain health will naturally rub off into creating a situation where your entire body is healthier. The main reason is that the same thing that keeps your brain healthy will maintain your general health. Eating right, drinking plenty of water, getting exercise, resting, and reducing stress are good for you all the way around.

Enjoy Your Retirement More

When you can be independent, remember your scheduled evening out with friends, and remember to pay your bills, you will obviously enjoy your retirement more. It's more pleasurable if you're healthy and your mind is sharp. You'll have a lot more fun because you will be free of other worries once you retire, and you're likely to earn more money longer due to having a sharp mind.

Keeping your mind sharp pays off in more than one way. Being independent as long as humanly possible is also a massive benefit to the rest of your family. The less your family worries about you, the more independent you can be, for longer. It's a lot less expensive for you to stay independent.

So, let's move on to look at things you can do to make your life better and to keep your mind sharp as you age.

Eat Right and Keep Moving

When it comes to your general health, there is not a much more effective plan than to eat right and to keep moving. The eating component is a lot more important than doing any type of planned exercise but adding in daily walking or other types of exercise will make it all that much more effective.

Eat Right and Mind Your Diet

It sounds simple to eat right, but with all the fad diets and questionable plans out there, the best thing you can do is just to eat right for your needs. No matter what type of diet you go on, eating fresh local produce is better for you than any other type of food. Try making half your plate veggies and a fourth of it fruit, and you will automatically feel healthier. Your mind will become sharper too. The reason is that your brain needs glucose to work best, and the easiest way to use glucose in a healthy way is from fresh produce like fruit and veggies.

- **Eat More Fruit** – Some people are afraid of fruit but if you don't have diabetes, you can and should eat fruit. Don't drink fruit; eat it. Eating berries is especially very good for you. Fruit is fantastic for brain health. The more colorful the fruit, the more you should eat of it. Dementia is marked by plaque build-up in the brain, but fruit can help reduce that.

- **Eat More Veggies** – Just like fruit, veggies help reduce oxidative stress which is thought to be one of the causes or contributors to different forms of cognitive decline (including various forms of dementia and Alzheimer's disease). This makes veggies one of the most important things you should consume.
- **Drink Lots of Fresh Filtered Water** – Most of us are walking around slightly dehydrated because we have learned to ignore our thirst cues. In fact, your body wants water so much that sometimes it tells you that you are hungry in hopes you'll eat something with moisture. Your brain cells require a certain balance of compounds, including water, to work properly. If you are fully hydrated, you'll be less likely to suffer cloudy thinking.
- **Avoid Processed Food and Sugar** – Every diet that exists asks that you stop eating processed food and sugar. No one is ever going to say that it's a good thing to eat this stuff. Therefore, regardless of the type of diet that you choose to follow, stop eating processed food and sugar as much as you can other than the occasional treat.
- **Eat Fewer Simple Carbohydrates** – While today there is no such thing as "complex carbs" or carb combining to create a "complete" protein, the fact is that some carbohydrates can contribute to weight gain as well as blood sugar issues in some people. White rice, white noodles, white pizza crust are all examples of this. However, you don't need to stop eating it; just eat less and watch your serving sizes.
- **Eat Healthy Protein** – When it comes to eating protein, your body needs some protein to run properly. However, it can make protein out of the food you consume if you are consuming enough calories. You only need about 15 percent of your caloric intake to be from protein, but you can go up to 30 percent if that makes you feel better. Choose from lean fish, turkey, chicken, beef, pork, and tofu. Choose cage-free, grass-fed, organic choices in the right serving sizes, which for most people is about the size of the palm of your hand.
- **Eat the Right Serving Sizes** – Whether we like it or not, calories matter. You can find out what your calorie needs are by looking at a chart, or you can even get tested to find out how much your body metabolizes. Just go by the weight you want to be on the chart (<https://www.calculator.net/calorie-calculator.html>). For example, a 5-foot 5-inch 52-year-old woman who weighs or wants to weigh 135 pounds can eat about 1223 calories a day if she only sits around and never moves. That's the baseline that she needs to maintain this weight.
- **Eat When You're Hungry** – You really don't need to eat at prescribed times. Just because the clock says it's time to eat, doesn't mean you need to eat. If you are not hungry, you don't need to eat. If you just eat when you have real stomach

hunger, you usually can't overeat. If you need to be on top of your game brain-wise, it's a great day for starting the day with a fruit and yogurt smoothie bowl.

When you focus on eating right at least 80 percent of the time and moving enough at least 80 percent of the time, guess what - you will experience at least 80 percent of the results that you wanted before you started. This is just a way to tell you that you don't have to be perfect to experience the benefits of eating right when it comes to your brain health. Add in exercise, and you can eat more and still benefit from a proper diet.

Exercise and Move More

No matter your age or physical fitness level right now, moving more is going to benefit you unless you have an illness where your doctor asks you not to move. And that is very rare because the human body simply works better when it's in motion regularly. In fact, it's said that sitting more than four hours a day at a stretch is worse than smoking.

And, one of the very best things you can do for your health is not to smoke. So, it makes sense that you need to move more. But, like most things, it really doesn't take much to make exercise pay off.

- **Do What You Love Doing** – Don't think that you must do any type of exercise you don't like. You don't. You can find something that will work and that you like doing and can get through without too much discomfort. The important thing is to do something each day. Even if all you do is go for a twenty-minute walk after dinner, that's better than doing nothing.
- **Try Something Once** – If you're not sure about something and you think it's safe for you to try (ask your doctor if you're unsure), go ahead and try it at least once. You might love rebounding, hot yoga, or pole dancing. Who knows what you will like until you give it a try? Hint: trying something new can become the entire exercise when you're being active. You don't have to do anything twice.
- **Try a Group Class** – One way to get motivated is to go to a group class. Group classes often have an emphasis on helping motivate each other. It's also fun to socialize at the same time. Try a group water aerobics class or if you are at a higher level, try a group cycling class so that you challenge yourself more.
- **Do It at Home** – Even if you don't want to be around other people when you sweat, today you can do so much at home. There are videos with any type of exercise class you want to join that you can watch right on your television anytime you want to. These can be found on Amazon Prime or you can rent or purchase them.
- **Find a Friend** – If you have some energetic friends already, get together to do some form of exercise. You can make it a regular date with each of your friends

to do something physical together. For example, you can hike with Sue on Sunday and go to Jazzercise class with Rebecca on Tuesday.

- **Learn from an Expert** – When you are learning something new, it's also a good idea (if you can afford it) to take a class or hire an expert to teach you the right form. You may also enjoy the movements more when you know how to do them right to avoid body pain. For example, with yoga, it's essential to do the movements correctly to avoid injury and gain the most benefits.
- **Join a Team** – If you enjoy team sports, it's a great way to ensure that you get your exercise in. Between training, between seasons, and practicing during the season and playing the games, you'll get in plenty of workouts. Plus, you'll have a built-in social life too. And yes, there are team sports in all kinds of games for all ages in many areas. If there isn't, you can organize one of your own.

Ensuring that you exercise and keep moving every single day is essential. Regularly you only need a brisk 20- to 30-minute walk at a minimum to maintain health. If you want to build muscle or lose weight through exercise, you may need to plan something more intense. The trick, though, is to mix it up and do different things each day to keep it fun and exciting.

It's hard to overstress the importance of eating right and moving more. But, the really cool thing is that it doesn't have to be super-strict to be effective. Again, just focus on doing the right thing 80 percent of the time, and you will be super-successful using diet and exercise to improve your mind and keep it sharp.

Factors That Contribute to a Dulling Mind

Let's take a break from discussing diet and exercise to talk about the things that contribute to a dulling mind. If you want to avoid having those age-related memory loss moments, you can. Just work to avoid the things that will not keep your mind very sharp, or at least know how to deal with it if it happens to you.

- **Smoking** – Smoking cigarettes is the leading cause of most cardiovascular illnesses. It's clear from the research that not smoking is one of the best things you can do for your health. If you do smoke now, consider finding a smoking cessation class to join because that's the best way you can help your brain health right now.
- **Poor Diet** – Eating a poor diet with lots of processed food, fat, salt, and sugar is the other factor most likely to affect your brain health. Outside of smoking, this is the next most important way to prevent issues with your brain health, not to mention your overall physical health.

- **Bad Posture** – One issue that really affects people is chronic pain. Some forms of chronic pain are simply caused by bad posture over the years. The sooner you can ensure that you are using the right posture for living your daily life, the better. It might help to go to a couple sessions with a physical therapist who can check your posture and show you how to correct any issues.
- **Being Sedentary** – As mentioned earlier, sitting for more than four hours a day is said to be worse than smoking. Having said that, you can improve your situation faster if you're only sedentary rather than a smoker and sedentary. Start small and make yourself get up and move around for ten minutes every 90 minutes.
- **Stress and Anxiety** – When you have a lot of stress and anxiety, your cortisol levels are usually much higher. These stress hormones play a significant role in cognitive decline. If you do have problems with stress and anxiety, you'll want to seek professional help with this to ensure you can move forward.
- **Not Sleeping Enough (Or Too Much)** – Sleep is an essential component to your ability to heal yourself from within. Sleeping at least eight hours a night is considered the best amount, but everyone is different. The way to find out what works for you is to try to go to bed at the same time most nights and sleep until you wake up without an alarm. However, if you do tend to sleep over nine or ten hours a night (and are still tired), you may want to get your thyroid checked.
- **Medication** – Some medications can mess with your brain in severe ways. A common medication for chronic pain is Gabapentin, and it's well known that it dulls the mind. Some other drugs are also starting to be problems with patients exhibiting cognitive decline. If you are on meds and having memory problems or other issues with your brain health, talk to your doctor about going off those medications if possible.
- **Illness** – Any type of illness can affect your brain health and make you feel and act not as sharp as you'd like. However, being aware of the illnesses you have and how they might affect your brain health and your mind can give you information on how to combat the problems through supplementation, medication, and so forth – as needed.
- **Drug Use** – While some studies are suggesting that cannabis use can improve the mind of elderly people, the research is still out. If you need to use cannabis, realize that it might, like any other drug, affect your memory or cognition.
- **Alcohol Use** – While drinking alcohol in moderation is tied to improved cognition and health, overusing is not. Double-check your serving sizes and don't get drunk if you're going to drink alcohol. If you are having issues, go ahead and stop.

- Isolation – One of the saddest things that happen to people when they get older is that sometimes they start to isolate themselves. If you find that you tend to spend a lot of time alone because you prefer it, that's fine. But you may want to schedule some time with others to avoid isolation, as this has been linked to the dulling of the mind due to the lack of mental stimulation that other people provide.

Avoiding these factors that can contribute to a dulling mind is important to keep your mind sharp as you age. Consider what you'll do after you retire when your kids grow, and when you are older in terms of remaining social, eating right, moving, and being a contributing member of society.

Get Enough Rest and Relaxation

Earlier, we talked about how stress and anxiety can play a major role in mental decline. When you go to a psychiatrist, one of the first tests that they give you is a memory test. They will ask you to memorize three words they tell you something like ball, train, and hat and then at the end of your visit they'll want you to repeat those things to them. If you cannot remember, it shows them that you have too much stress in your life.

One of the factors that contribute to this dulling of your mind is not getting enough sleep, having your body in "fight or flight" mode 24/7, and having too much stress hormone (cortisol) in your bloodstream. If you have a bigger belly than the rest of you and you can't sleep well comfortably, it's more than likely some of your issues are related.

There are things you can do to get more rest and relax more to lower stress:

- Learn to Meditate – Study after study is showing that meditation helps people relax, lowers blood pressure, and contributes to a good quality of life. If you don't like meditating, you can choose to pray instead. Studies show intense praying or meditating can relieve stress and improve brain function.
- Start a Yoga Practice – One of the best exercises for your overall health, mind, body, and spirit is yoga. There are different types of yoga, so find a class that is for a beginner so that you can try it out without any pressure. There is a practice for every single age and health issue.
- Identify Stressors – One way to reduce stress is to find out if the cause is something external. Hate your job? Dislike something at home? Having issues in your marriage? Kids are not behaving? Money problems? All these things lead to stress, which leads to lack of sleep, which leads to brain decline.
- Find Ways to Eliminate Stressors – When you identify a stressor, if it's possible to eliminate it or change something about it to make it work for you then make a plan to do that. For example, if you have a lousy time at work, start applying for other jobs or join a training program to help you get promoted.

- **Get Back to Nature** – Science has shown in many different studies that humans do better when they get out in nature every single day. Whether you look out the window at a magical view or walk barefoot in the park is up to you. However, there are also positive studies about "grounding" that lets you know that it is important to get out into nature as much as you can.
- **Start a Journal** – For some people, reducing stress by writing in a journal is helpful. The type of journal you use depends on your personality. You may like to use a bullet journal, a gratitude journal, or something else entirely such as a regular diary. It's up to you; if it helps you experience less stress, do it.
- **Color or Draw** – Some people find it very helpful to take some time before going to bed to sit in the quiet and color or draw. There are even studies that show that doodling or coloring reduces blood pressure in patients with high blood pressure.
- **Read** – When it comes to reading, it's important to choose the right thing to read when you are stressed out and cannot get rest. Don't read anything that will upset you; instead, read uplifting and positive information that helps you reduce stress.
- **Create a Night-Time Ritual** – To help you get more regular sleep, you want to set up a night-time ritual that will help your mind accept that it's time for sleeping and resting. Stop eating a couple hours before bed, turn off screens, avoid caffeine and sugar, and keep your room cool and comfortable so you can sleep.

If you are particularly anxious and stressed out, consider seeking professional help. Some types of anxiety are related to health. For example, someone with low iron can experience high anxiety and heart palpitations, so anytime you experience something like this, make an appointment with your health care provider to ensure that everything is going well health-wise.

Activities That Sharpen Your Mind

One way to keep your mind sharp is to participate in activities that help your mind work better. Keeping your brain limber is a lot like keeping your entire body healthy and limber – you must use it. As they said, when you were younger, "...if you don't use it, you will lose it." These are activities you can choose from that will help you improve your brain function.

- **Walk More** – While this is mentioned in other areas, it cannot be overstated that moving is essential. If you can walk, you should seek to walk a minimum of 10,000 steps every day to maintain your current physical fitness level.

- Read Hard Things – At least once a day, read something for 20 to 30 minutes that makes you really think and challenges your ideas or requires that you also look up a little information on the topic for full understanding. Using parts of your brain that you don't use as much now since graduating from school will help keep your mind limber.
- Take Up a New Hobby – Again, learning something new is very stimulating to your brain. By making new connections, you improve the old connections.
- Listen to Music and Dance – When you're listening to music and dancing around your house, you're improving your mood, your health, and reducing stress all in one. Plus, by singing the songs while you listen and dance, you will also stimulate another area of your brain, making it all work together better to improve your cognitive performance.
- Take a Class – If you're not very good at learning things on your own and need more structure to do it, take a class. You may, depending on your age, qualify for free tuition or be able to sit in on a class (an audit) for free or at a lesser charge. If you want credit, though, it can also be worth it for more reasons than mind development.
- Do Puzzles – Doing a puzzle every day, whether a word, number or shape puzzle, can help you work out parts of your brain that you don't normally work out daily. It helps keep your mind sharp and your memory intact.
- Do More Math – Even if you don't normally like math, doing math is helpful in keeping your brain sharp. Consider math puzzles, or just doing your times tables in your head. Any math you can do in your head can help. It's a good thing to do when you're waiting in line too.
- Eat New Food – Doing things that heighten your senses is a great way to improve brain function. Eating is a fun thing to do that can also be good for you. Instead of eating the same chicken, rice, and veggies for dinner tonight, try cooking something (or going out) to eat - something brand new and different from your normal food.
- Learn a New Language – A really great way to stimulate your brain is to try to learn a new language. Learning a foreign language engages all parts of your brain as you picture what the words mean, pronounce them, and write them.

These activities will stimulate your brain in a new way. If you think of your body, we know that physical activity will increase blood flow. Doing an activity that challenges your mind and is harder than what you did yesterday will also increase blood flow in your brain and thus help you improve your cognitive ability.

Systemize Your Life to Improve Your Memory

There is no point in trying to remember everything. Instead, create habits that allow you to use your brain to remember more important things than where your keys are. For example, you can systemize the following and more:

- **Chores** – Everyone has tasks that need to be done every single day. If you set up a schedule for when you are going to do them and do them the same way each time, you will have less trouble remembering. For example, if you put into your calendar to clean your AC filter, you won't forget.
- **Where Your Stuff Goes** – Work toward everything you own having a special place to live. Your keys, your brush, your wallet, shoes, magazines, makeup – whatever it is — it should have a home to hang out in when you're not using it, and it should go directly back when not in use. You'll spend less time looking for stuff if you make this a habit.
- **How and Where You Shop** – While shopping can be fun, for the things you buy the most you already know where the least expensive places are. And if you shop at those places more often, you'll get used to where items are and finish faster. Better yet, order your groceries for delivery, and you won't forget a thing.
- **Automate Your Bills** – Set up your bills to pay automatically. Don't use the bill's system unless you have to; instead use your bank's bill-paying system. That gives you more control over the payments. Some bills give you a discount if you set up auto-payments with them, so ensure that you check that.
- **Habituate Self-Care** – Washing your face, daily walking, exercising, and doctor appointments are all important parts of your life. If you make self-care a habit, you're going to be less likely to skip breakfast, your vitamins, or walking every day.
- **Trick Your Mind to Remember** – Sometimes it's hard to remember things but the more you practice, the better your memory will work. For example, when you meet a new person and they tell you their name, make it a habit to repeat their name to them, and look right at them to find something about them that will remind you of them. For example, let's say you met a new woman with red hair named Rachel. You would say in your mind, "Redhead Rachel is a nurse from Boston" or whatever you need to remember.

If you set up your life to be as automated as possible, you'll have a lot more brain space for more exciting activities like reading books, taking up a hobby, or traveling.

Keep Learning and Trying New Things

One of the most important aspects of keeping your brain sharp as you age is to keep learning new things. The more new things you learn, the more parts of your brain will be active. And your brain might even grow, causing it to be even more responsive.

- **Be Active with Friends** – If you don't have enough friends, you can make new ones. You will automatically make friends when you are out learning and doing new things. Be open, say hello, and ask people about themselves.
- **Take a Class** – You can take academic, art, exercise, dance, and even gardening classes. Whatever you want to learn, you can probably take a class about it. You can take classes online and offline.
- **Read a Hard Book** – One way to learn new things if you cannot be super-active is to read hard books. Find a book about a topic you know nothing about but are interested in, and then start reading. Keep your dictionary close by so you can look up new words.
- **Learn a New Word Every Day** – Speaking of the dictionary, get it out and learn one new word every single day. Write down the word, use it in as many sentences as you can in writing, then use it in your normal day with others if you can find a way. It's fun, and you will learn so many new things.
- **Try to Do Something New Monthly** – We all get into our habits and that's great, but it's good to stretch yourself and find something new to learn or do every single month. You can often sign up for alerts for your local area for educational and fun events near you.

The more you expose yourself to new things and new ideas - while also systemizing the life you have so that you can focus on the new things you want to do and see and learn, the sharper your mind will become. Your brain does get smaller as you age, but that's only if you do nothing to stop it. Instead, grow your brain by experiencing life to the fullest, being social, and never giving up learning new things.