As we get older our brain processing speed slows down and most of us will notice that our memory isn’t quite what it used to be. It is a fact that memory changes with age, so the more we understand its strengths and weaknesses, the more we can take action to maintain a healthy brain.
Protect Your Cognitive Health

Maintaining your cognitive health is a vital part of healthy aging. Cognition is a collection of mental processes that include the ability to learn new things, intuition, judgment, language and remembering. A stroke or Alzheimer’s disease can cause cognitive impairment, as can medication side effects, stress, and poor sleep.

The good news is there are steps you can take to maintain and even improve the health of your brain. Eating smart, moving more, staying socially connected and challenging your brain are great places to start.

Although there are no guarantees that any one thing you do will protect you against cognitive decline, there is growing evidence that cognitive exercise is beneficial. There may be something to the idea of “use it or lose it,” but it’s more than just using your brain. Evidence suggests that challenging your brain is what matters most as it can actually increase the number of brain cells and strengthen the connection between them.

Cognitive Training

As we age, we tend to fall into familiar patterns and routines that are not helpful for our brain. The most impactful benefit comes when you engage in a variety of activities each day that stimulate and challenge different parts of your brain. Your brain is challenged when you move outside your comfort zone. Engaging in the arts, taking dance lessons, or learning a new language gives a workout to many parts of your memory and thinking skills.

We hear a lot about brain games these days. Most experts agree the key to strengthening your brain is to choose games you enjoy that are novel and provide you with a moderate to high level of challenge. Find games that continually test your abilities, so as you get better the games get harder. Select games that require concentration and a quick response. If you love crossword puzzles and Sudoku, choose ones that get more and more challenging. Better yet, give yourself a time limit and try to beat it each time you play.

Adapt to Your Aging Brain

Incorporate practical strategies to make remembering easier. Use calendars for appointments and as a place to write down important things you want to do or to remember. Make it your daily routine to update and review your calendar.

Create a dedicated space for your glasses, keys, wallet and cell phone so you minimize your potential for losing them. Make certain tasks routine such as taking your medications along with the time to get up in the morning or go to bed.

Often it is not so much our memory that is the problem, it is our attention. When we are not paying attention the memories we form don’t stick and we can’t retrieve them later. Practice paying attention by being ‘in the moment’ and focusing on one thing or one person at a time. Not only will you improve your memory, you will also reduce your stress.
Maintaining healthy habits is central to preserving your health. Unfortunately, it is common to drift away from healthy habits in retirement. These changes happen in small degrees and may be related to stressors, such as being a caregiver. Stress can fundamentally impact your physical and cognitive health. It is vital to place a priority on self-care strategies. Being physically active helps manage stress and has the added benefit of improving your cognitive functioning. Engaging in pleasurable activities is another outlet for stress relief. Eating nourishing foods helps with weight management and preserves brain function. Focus on making changes in your life that provide deeper benefits to your health. Incorporate a wide spectrum of healthy lifestyle choices into your daily life to manage your stress, improve your health, and maintain your cognitive capabilities. Then you can focus on living your life consistent with your values and engage in activities that bring you joy.

**Take Action Now**

- **Get out of your comfort zone.** Challenge yourself to drive home a different way. Take a walk along a different path than you normally walk.

- **Explore your creativity.** Engage in a creative activity that is new and different from anything you have ever done before.

- **Take your skill to the next level.** Prepare a meal that is complex and unlike anything you have cooked in the past. Better yet, make a healthy recipe!

- **Employ practical strategies to help you remember.** Keep a calendar and establish a dedicated place for your things.

- **Learn a new language.** When you challenge yourself to learn a foreign language, your brain gets a workout!

- **Manage your stroke risk.** Take steps to control your blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes risk. Stop smoking.

**GOAL:** Pick one activity that you would not normally choose to do and engage in it.

**Expert Insight**

*Karen Grothe, Ph.D., L.P.,* Associate Professor of Psychology and Co-Chair, Division of Consultation, Department of Psychiatry & Psychology at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

"Maintaining healthy habits is central to preserving your health. Unfortunately, it is common to drift away from healthy habits in retirement. These changes happen in small degrees and may be related to stressors, such as being a caregiver. Stress can fundamentally impact your physical and cognitive health. It is vital to place a priority on self-care strategies. Being physically active helps manage stress and has the added benefit of improving your cognitive functioning. Engaging in pleasurable activities is another outlet for stress relief. Eating nourishing foods helps with weight management and preserves brain function. Focus on making changes in your life that provide deeper benefits to your health. Incorporate a wide spectrum of healthy lifestyle choices into your daily life to manage your stress, improve your health, and maintain your cognitive capabilities. Then you can focus on living your life consistent with your values and engage in activities that bring you joy."
Charter House

211 2nd Street NW
Rochester, MN 55901

507-266-8572

www.charterhouse-mayo.org

e-mail: charterhouse@mayo.edu

Find us on facebook

Dan Abraham Healthy Living Center

565 1st St SW
Rochester, MN 55901

507-266-4688

dahlc.mayoclinic.org

email: dahlc@mayo.edu

Find us on facebook