



# Boost Your Brain Health at Every Age

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Simple strategies that can help  
prevent dementia, depression,  
anxiety and more



# Surprising Habits That Keep Your Mind Sharp

Cognitive decline is far from inevitable as you get older, especially when you're proactive about keeping your brain in good shape. Here are five ways to help keep your brain in top form.



## ■ Learn Something New

Researchers at the Center for Vital Longevity in Dallas found that adults who took mentally challenging classes (such as digital photography or quilting) saw their working memory improve, while those who engaged in “low challenge” activities that didn’t require as much brainpower did not.

## ■ Get More Shut-eye

Brain health relies on good sleep. Research suggests that when you’re deep in dreamland, your brain is busy doing maintenance tasks, like improving nerve cell communication and removing toxin buildup.

## ■ Feed Your Gut

Numerous studies connect the good bacteria in your gut with brain health. A healthy gut “biome”—that is, the microbes in your intestinal tract—has been linked to lower inflammation overall throughout your body. Fill your plate with foods that contain probiotics (basically anything fermented, like yogurt and kefir as well as sauerkraut, pickles and miso). And load up on fruits, vegetables and healthy fats like olive oil.

## ■ Clean Up Your Room

If your nightstand is overflowing with books and memorabilia, that would be a

great place to begin clutter-clearing. Research published in the journal *Sleep* shows that a messy, disorganized sleep space increases your risk of cognitive dysfunction, depression and insomnia.

## ■ Play Checkers

Or chess. Or any board game, for that matter. In a 2020 University of Edinburgh study of women and men in their 70s, those who frequently played games that come in a box or that you hold in your hands experienced slower declines in memory and thinking skills, compared to those who didn’t have a regular game night.



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# Could You Be Depressed and Not Know It?

Feeling sad sometimes is a normal part of being alive. Depression, on the other hand, is a mental health disorder that interferes with your ability to enjoy life. It's common, and it's highly treatable. When should you worry about a low mood? Ask yourself these five questions.



## 1. Did Something Cause Your Sadness?

If you can point to something specific, like a recent move or an argument with a friend, you're probably not depressed. Depression often seems to come out of nowhere with no clear trigger, says psychotherapist Annette Nunez, Ph.D. People feel sad but can't explain why.



## 2. Do You Feel Hopeless, Irritable or Angry?

Depression often causes other feelings besides sadness: It can make you feel hopeless, worthless, anxious, fatigued, irritable or even angry, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). You may also feel empty and lose interest in hobbies or activities you used to enjoy.



## 3. Have Your Sleeping Habits Changed?

Depression often affects your sleep habits in big ways. You might struggle to fall asleep; you might wake up too early; or you might sleep a lot more than usual. Any of these changes can be a sign that there's something more going on.



## 4. Are You Eating More or Less Than Usual?

A shift in your eating patterns can be another telltale sign of depression, notes the NIMH. If you've noticed unintentional weight gain or loss over a short period of time, you may be dealing with this mood disorder.



## 5. How Long Have You Felt This Way?

Think about how long you've felt any of the above. Feelings of sadness typically improve or go away with a little time, whereas symptoms of depression tend to stick around. "If your sad feelings last longer than two weeks, it's a strong indicator that something else is going on," says Nunez.



**If you think you may have depression based on your answers, talk to your health care provider, who can give you a simple screening.**



# 3 Amazing Ways Exercise Helps Your Brain Stay Strong

You know exercise is great for your body. But check out the difference being active can make for your brain.

## 1. Better Memory

Those “senior moments” that aggravate you? A daily walk might help. Older adults who walk regularly have better memory recall than their inactive peers, reports the National Institute on Aging. And the more you exercise, the better your memory may get.

## 2. Clearer Thinking

Getting your heart rate up pumps more blood to your brain, bringing with it vital nutrients that improve overall functioning. The increased flow also helps sweep away metabolic waste, including amyloid beta protein, which is linked to Alzheimer’s disease.

## 3. Improved Problem-Solving

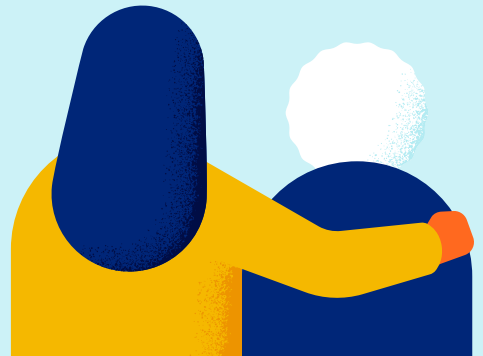
Over time, regular workouts can help lower your blood pressure. This is good news for your brain because high blood pressure can reduce oxygen supply. This damages nerve cells that are used for decision-making, focusing, organizing information, and memory.





# Dementia Isn't Inevitable, and Other Little-Known Facts You Need to Know

Nearly 6 million Americans are living with some form of dementia. But that doesn't mean it's an unavoidable part of growing older. There's a lot you can do to protect your brain health, starting with educating yourself on the facts.



## Dementia Is an Umbrella Term, Not a Single Condition

There are many different forms and causes of dementia, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Alzheimer's disease is the most common and occurs when abnormal plaques build up in the brain. Other forms include vascular dementia (reduced blood flow to the brain) and Lewy body dementia (abnormal protein deposits in nerve cells). Despite their differences, all forms involve substantial brain changes over time.

## Memory Loss Is Just One Symptom

Memory loss is the predominant sign. But dementia affects language and decision-making,

too, says Scott Kaiser, M.D., director of geriatric cognitive health at the Pacific Neuroscience Institute at Providence Saint John's Health Center. Other symptoms may include difficulty keeping track of time or pronouncing certain words.

## A Family History of Dementia Doesn't Seal Your Fate

It's true that you have a higher chance of developing dementia if it runs in your family, but it's far from a guarantee. Your genetic makeup is just one factor that contributes, says Dr. Kaiser. "Rest assured, dementia is not inevitable," he says. The key? Using that family history as a motivator. Ask your provider for a cognitive screening test and start making some healthy lifestyle changes, like the ones below.

## Healthy Habits Play a Major Role in Prevention

All the things you do to protect against conditions like heart disease and diabetes help keep your brain in shape, too, says Rong Zhang, Ph.D., a professor of neurology at University of Texas Southwestern. His recommendations:

- Be active every day. Exercise helps improve blood flow to the brain and lower inflammation.
- Eat more fruits, veggies and whole grains. These foods are at the heart of the Alzheimer's Association–approved MIND Diet.
- Stay connected to friends. Meaningful relationships are a major part of longevity.

# Why Anxiety Can Literally Be a Full-Body Experience

Your body may be sending you clues that it's time to talk to your provider about your fears and worries. Be on the lookout for these five common physical signs of anxiety.

## Tense, Achy Muscles

The same stress response that triggers worry also tells your muscles to tighten. You may also feel tension and soreness in the head, shoulders, neck and jaw.

## Rapid Heartbeat

In stressful situations, your body churns out adrenaline. Your heart pumps faster, sending more blood to your muscles.

## Digestive Issues

In times of stress, your sympathetic nervous system may prompt your digestive tract to empty out quickly, or not much at all, leading to diarrhea, constipation or stomach pain.

## Sweating

Stress and anxiety can make you sweat more than usual, especially your palms, face, armpits and feet. Worry can raise your body temperature, which leads to sweating as your body tries to cool itself down.

## Shakiness

When the stress hormone cortisol rises, it tells your body to release more glucose to give you the energy to handle whatever is making you anxious. These changes in blood sugar can make you feel shaky.



## How to Find More Calm

Feeling anxious from time to time is to be expected. But if your anxiety is making it hard to get through your day, it's time to get help, says Jo Eckler, Psy.D., of Austin, Texas.

See your health care provider to rule out other health issues that may be to blame for the physical symptoms you're experiencing. If all signs point to anxiety, ask about treatment options. Your provider will take a look at your symptoms and lifestyle and help you find a mix of treatments that are right for you.

Activities that relieve stress might also be helpful to add into your day, Eckler says. Yoga, tai chi, being out in nature, and enjoying hobbies are all great options. "Anxiety isn't going to completely go away, but with some help and effort, you can find ways to help reduce its impact on your life," Eckler says.