**Health Tips to Foil Dementia**

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*Live Long, Die Short: A Guide to Authentic Health and Successful Aging*

A long-term study that began in 1986 and continued for more than twenty years tracked the lifestyles and mental decline in a group of nuns. Upon death, autopsies showed that many had Alzheimer’s brains; tangles of neurons and plaques of beta amyloid material. Normally, these are associated with Alzheimer’s Diseases, and yet there were no signs or symptoms of the disease. The investigators concluded that the nuns’ lifestyle, which included regular physical and mental activity, protected them from the onset of the symptoms of dementia, even when the disease was anatomically present. Subsequent studies have consistently demonstrated that cognitive stimulation, particularly learning new things, improves memory and brain health and lowers the risk of developing the symptoms of dementia.

**Brainy Knowledge We Now Know …**

We know now that our brain continues to develop across a lifespan, rewiring itself in response to stimulation or injury. We refer to this lifelong ability as “neuroplasticity.” Neuroplasticity allows neural connections in the brain to compensate for disease and injury and make adjustments to change. Our brains produce nearly 10,000 new cells every day (called neurogenesis) in some regions, and if the brain is challenged with learning, these neurons will become incorporated into new pathways. Exercise your brain, and you can strengthen it somewhat like a muscle, thereby enhancing your memory and cognitive ability. Don’t use your brain, and the critical neural roadways will atrophy and no longer be able to be used.

**Five Ways to Improve Your Brain**

If you’re looking to flex some brain muscle for long-term cognitive health, here are five tips for getting started …

1. **Challenge Your Brain** – Learning new things (such as a new language or musical instrument) gives the brain constant stimulation to keep the pathways it has and to develop new ones. Additional brainteasers include simple tasks like brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand or taking a different route home from an outing.
2. **Keep Moving** – Any movement, walking, riding a bike, doing laundry … helps your brain function better. Neuroplasticity, neurogenesis, and normal brain functioning, have an absolute requirement for oxygen and glucose. Movement improves the body’s ability to deliver both to the brain. Additionally, physical activity is associated with brain-derived neurotropic factors (BDNF) and nerve growth factor (NGF) that stimulate the brain.
3. **Eat Healthy** – As a general rule, if your great-grandmother never ate it, more than likely, you shouldn’t either. Go fresh. Go local. Eat fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, fish, and whole grains. Limit meats and fatty foods. One study at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that the risk of Alzheimer’s was 80 percent higher in subjects who were obese. Foods low in fat, high in omega-3 fatty acids and anti-oxidants: foods plentiful in a Mediterranean-type diet.
4. **Practice Mindfulness** – Chronic stress rots us within, comprising not only cardiac and gastrointestinal, but also brain function, raising your risk of dementia. We have learned that it is critical to take mental breaks – be it through yoga, meditation, reading, art or music … anything that brings you joy. These breaks stop the momentum of rising stress as we move through our ever more frenetic days.
5. **Sequential Task vs. Multitask –** Studies have shown that multitasking negatively affects memory and inhibits learning. Instead, try sequential tasking. That is, focus on the task you’re doing now until it is completed or you decide to move to another. The rapid back-and-forth focus of multitasking is destructive, stress building and frankly, nothing to brag about. Your brain will function more efficiently with linear, or sequential tasking, and you’ll be pleased the more creative and higher quality results.

***Live Long. Live Well!***