



**Comfort
Keepers®**

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The Key to Maintaining Brain Health Late in Life

A Complex Organ

When it comes to exploring the brain, it would seem that with each breakthrough the scientific community makes, new unprecedented questions arise. While this is certainly positive in that it allows research to become more focused, it also illuminates the fact that the brain is vastly and endlessly complex.

In spite of all of its mysteries, one thing we do know is that the brain – like all of our organs – does indeed age. As we get older, the brain's overall volume gradually decreases (at approximately 5% per decade after the age of 40), causing nerve cells to lose certain connections. Reduction in blood flow and certain cardiovascular conditions can add to this as well.

For seniors, these factors may lead to occasional forgetfulness or lapses in memory. Significant memory loss, however, is not a normal part of aging and may be indicative of Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. If your aging loved ones are experiencing memory loss or have had problems with language skills, perception, or other mental functions, it's imperative that you address these concerns with a physician.

Ways to Keep the Brain Healthy

Research has indicated that there are several ways that older adults (and those of all ages) can help reduce the risk of cognitive decline – many of which are beneficial for other aspects of the body. Encourage your aging loved ones to incorporate the following best practices into their lifestyle. Be sure that, prior to beginning any new exercise regimen or diet, your loved ones consult with a physician and dietician.

- **Stimulation:** In the last few years, there have been numerous research studies in the area of neurological plasticity, which refers to the brain's ability to structurally modify in response to new experiences. This "re-wiring" of nerve cells is actually what is at the center of most cognitive and physical rehabilitation practices. However, it essentially serves the same function for those looking to keep their brains healthy, and it can be done simply by learning new skills or keeping the brain regularly "exercised" through puzzles or games. Many suggest that seniors enroll in a class or other form of organized learning – which will help not only in developing new skills but also with cultivating socialization.
- **Exercise Regularly:** While it's not exactly news that exercise is good for the body, it may come as a surprise to some that regular exercise also has quite an impact on mental health. Physical activity improves cardiovascular health, which in turn helps supply the brain with blood. It also helps in developing new/increasing existing neural connections (see neurological plasticity above), allowing the brain to be more adaptive. Research suggests that regular exercise can also significantly reduce mental stress. Some seniors may choose to join a class with close friends for exercise, but it can just as easily be done at home. The key is to ensure that the heart rate is elevated through moderate activity, for at least 20-30 minutes every day.
- **Watch Your Diet:** The food we consume has a direct effect on our mental wellbeing and health. In order to operate at its optimum level, the brain requires fuel in the form of vitamins, minerals, and other essential nutrients. If your current diet consists primarily of salt, sugar, fat, and refined/processed foods, consider switching things around. Studies show that diets consisting of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, sources of B vitamins, and lean meats can significantly reduce anxiety levels and even the risk of depression.

Fast Fact

Despite the fact that the human brain represents only two percent of the body's weight, it actually receives nearly a quarter of the body's total blood supply.

- **Stay Social:** Although it's not entirely understood how socialization bolsters brain health, studies show that a correlation between having strong social connections and longer life expectancy does exist. Interaction, whether it be with friends, family members, or next-door neighbors, appears to reduce the risk of cognitive decline and improve overall mental wellbeing. This is especially evident in those who volunteer their time to help others. Try reaching out through organizations, community centers, or schools to see how you can help make a positive impact on others – and the health of your brain.

What unifies all of these best practices for maintaining brain health? The key, as countless scientific studies would suggest, is engagement. In this case, it means getting out and meeting new people versus staying inside and watching TV, choosing to find healthy alternatives to cheap fast food, and finding ways to help not only yourself but those in your community as well.

Comfort Keepers® Can Help

If your loved ones are working to improve their mental wellbeing and want to incorporate the aforementioned best practices into their lifestyle, we can help. In addition to companionship services, our caregivers can provide safe, reliable transportation to your loved ones' destinations. Whether they need to get to the community center to visit friends or to the grocery store for the week's supply of nutritious food, we can help them get there safely. To learn more about Comfort Keepers®, caregiving services, call your local office today.

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