

10 Things to Do Daily to Help Your Brain

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Given the fact your brain impacts all aspects of your life – from happiness and health, to relationships and rest – it’s important you understand how to take care of it
- › With more than 5 million Americans living with Alzheimer’s disease and as many as 16 million expected to suffer with it by 2050, caring for your brain is something you cannot afford to ignore
- › Aging and genes may not have the final word about the fate of your brain because its lifelong neuroplasticity enables you to positively influence its health on an ongoing basis
- › The actions, attitudes and thoughts you have today, as well as the daily choices you make, all play a meaningful role in your brain’s health
- › A few of the 10 actions you can take to positively affect your brain include eating a healthy diet, getting sufficient exercise and sleep, being creative, managing stress and cultivating optimism

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Even though your brain affects everything you do, you probably don't give it – literally – much thought. Clever pun aside, how often do you actually consider what your brain may need to stay healthy? Given the fact your brain impacts all aspects of your life – from happiness and health, to relationships and rest – it's important you understand how to take care of it.

While aging and genes have some effect, they may not have the final word about the fate of your brain. Your brain's lifelong neuroplasticity enables you to have continual influence over its health based on how you eat, sleep, exercise, express yourself, manage stress and more. The actions, attitudes and thoughts you have today, as well as the daily lifestyle choices you make, all play a meaningful role in your brain's health.

With more than 5 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease and as many as 16 million expected to suffer with it by 2050,¹ brain care is not a subject you can afford to ignore. Start today by reviewing the following 10 actions you can take daily to positively impact the health of your brain.²

1. Get Proper Sleep

About 1 in 3 Americans gets less than seven hours of sleep a night, and an estimated 83.6 million adults in the U.S. are sleep-deprived.^{3,4} You may be suffering from sleep deprivation if you work the night shift, have a sleep disorder such as sleep apnea or spend a lot of time in front of electronic gadgets at night. Particularly if your habit is to sleep five or fewer hours a night, you may be putting yourself at risk of cognitive decline and memory issues that will only accelerate as you age.

Dr. Paul Mathew, neurologist and assistant professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School, underscores the value of sleep to your overall health and well-being. He says:⁵

"Sleep is a critically important component of human existence. On average, humans spend about 25 to 35 percent of their lives sleeping. Sleep allows both the body and brain to rest and recover from the stress of daily life. As such, trouble sleeping can cause a range of health problems, and, if left untreated, dire consequences.

Even if sleep duration is good, sleep quality can be quite poor. People who wake up many times during the night can have some nights with zero hours of deep, restful sleep. Poor sleep quantity and/or quality can cause excessive daytime

drowsiness ... chronic fatigue, headaches, mood issues, irritability, poor memory and cognitive dysfunction."

The National Sleep Foundation offers three tips to support your body's need for quality sleep:⁶

- Vary your wake-up time on the weekends no more than an hour from your weekday schedule to better support a consistent sleep-wake schedule, also known as your body's circadian rhythm
- Take a 20-to-30-minute nap on **weekend afternoons, ideally between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m.**
- **Keep your naps on the shorter side** to avoid feeling groggy or cranky after them, and especially to prevent feeling too awake at bedtime

Whatever your approach, research suggests adults need right around eight hours of sleep a night. The sleep needs of seniors, young adults, teenagers and children vary. If you are not sure how much sleep you should be getting, review the sleep needs according to your age. Using a wearable fitness tracker at night may help you gain more insight into your sleep patterns.

2. Train Your Unconscious Mind

According to the documentary "**Automatic Brain: The Magic of the Unconscious Mind**," your subconscious mind manages about 90% of everything you do whether you are asleep or awake.

You may be surprised to learn your conscious mind plays only a minor role in guiding your life. In reality, most of what you think, say and do every day is a function of your "automatic," or unconscious brain (also known as your subconscious). Without you fully realizing it, your brain essentially is running your life on autopilot.

Because your subconscious plays such a big role, you will benefit from a better understanding of it, which will help you leverage it to your full advantage. Writing in

Psychology Today, Matt James, Ph.D., president of The Empowerment Partnership and master trainer of neuro-linguistic programming, assigns several qualities to your unconscious brain. Among them, states James, your unconscious brain:⁷

- **Acts like a young child** – Similar to a young child, your unconscious mind needs clear, detailed directions and lots of reminders. It takes instructions literally, so be sure to give it specific (and positive) guidance.
- **Communicates through emotion and symbols** – To get your attention quickly, your unconscious mind uses feelings, imagery and symbols. It's your job to discern what they mean.
- **Deals with positives only** – Negative words like "don't," "no" or "not" are largely ignored by your unconscious mind. For this reason, it is better to say, "I am going to improve my health by avoiding smoking" as opposed to "I don't want to smoke." You can also use creative imaging to center your mind on positive thoughts.

Because your unconscious mind has a pervasive influence on your life, you can actively harness its power and direct its influence in positive, life-giving ways by:⁸

- **Expressing yourself artistically** – Artistic endeavors such as coloring, drawing or painting make use of your subconscious by allowing your creativity to surface and making space for the expression of your true feelings. Because the goal is to tap into your unconscious mind, you don't need to be a great artist, just open to the creative process.
- **Rehearsing desired outcomes** – A great way to program a new activity, skill or thought into your unconscious mind is to rehearse it and repeat it until it takes root. Similar to the countless songs and jingles lodged in your subconscious, you can rehearse new attitudes, ideas, outcomes and thoughts that you want to become reality.

By frequently repeating out loud what you want, you aid your subconscious mind in catching on and helping you achieve your desired outcomes.

- **Reviewing before bed** – A great way to learn new material, such as exam material, goals, presentations or speeches, is to review it right before you go to sleep. Doing so helps transfer the content to your subconscious, putting it at the forefront of your mind as you drift off to sleep, and potentially influencing the content of your dreams.

3. Focus on One Task at a Time

Multitasking is perceived to be more efficient than a single-minded focus, but you'll feel calmer and more relaxed if you choose to focus on one task at a time. Think about the last time you tried to talk on the phone with a friend while cooking supper or checking your email. I bet you missed much of what your friend was saying because your brain was trying to split time between two very different activities.

Research conducted by Stanford University suggests multitasking reduces your efficiency because your brain can only do one thing well at a time. The study authors said: "People who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time."^{9,10}

So, give your brain a break and put your focus exclusively on the one task or person at hand. You may be surprised at the results.

4. Exercise Regularly

If you exercise regularly, you not only will have a healthier body, but a better brain, too. Regardless of your age, exercise can provide enormous benefits for your body and your mind. If you're over 40, it's especially important to step up your exercise program because your physical strength, stamina, balance and flexibility are beginning to decline due to age. Fortunately, doing the right type of exercise can help you counteract these declines.

To achieve optimal benefits, you'll want to establish a comprehensive exercise program that includes **high-intensity exercises**, strength training, core exercises and stretching. I also urge you to consider walking, in addition to your regular workout regimen, aiming for 10,000 to 15,000 steps per day.

Avoid sitting as much as possible – limiting your sitting to three hours a day or less. Prolonged sitting is a risk factor for chronic disease and early death – even if you are very fit and exercise regularly.

In terms of the effect exercise has on your brain, scientists have suggested it can trigger a change in the way your amyloid precursor protein is metabolized, thereby slowing down the onset and progression of Alzheimer's.¹¹ Exercise also increases your levels of the protein PGC-1alpha. Research has shown people with Alzheimer's have less PGC-1alpha in their brains.

A meta-analysis of 19 research studies published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine¹² suggests exercise has strong, positive effects on the brains of individuals ages 6 to 35. The study authors said, "acute physical exercise enhances executive functioning" in preadolescent children, adolescents and young adults.

5. Write Down Your Thoughts

The prevalence of computers, smartphones and tablets, as well as the diminished emphasis on handwriting means communication involving pen and paper is becoming less common. As such, technology is causing us to miss out on the brain benefits of writing. For example, research suggests writing things by hand helps you better internalize information and ensures you retain it.^{13,14} The study authors stated:¹⁵

"[E]ven when laptops are used solely to take notes, they may still be impairing learning because their use results in shallower processing. In three studies, we found that students who took notes on laptops performed worse on conceptual questions than students who took notes longhand."

We show ... laptop note takers' tendency to transcribe lectures verbatim, rather than processing information and reframing it in their own words, is detrimental to learning."

In addition, getting your thoughts down on paper can help you remove "mind clutter," especially before going to bed. If you are feeling highly stressed and anticipate not sleeping well as a result, make time to write out your thoughts before going to bed. Simply take out a pad of paper and a pen, set a timer for five to 10 minutes and begin writing whatever comes to mind. Avoid editing yourself and write literally anything and everything that comes to mind.

When left unchecked, lingering negative feelings and the emotional stress accompanying them can wreak havoc on your brain health. This is true even if you are doing everything else — diet, exercise and sleep, for instance — "right." Over time, as you stick with this habit — ideally as a weekly or even daily activity — your brain will connect with your subconscious, uncovering and surfacing valuable insights and thoughts of which you had previously been unaware.

If you are not sure how to address the issues and concerns that surface as you write them on paper, you might try the [Emotional Freedom Techniques \(EFT\)](#). It is a handy tool that involves light tapping over the major energy meridians of your body. EFT is quick and painless, and you can use it as often as you need to unload emotional baggage.

6. Eat a Healthy Diet

The following dietary recommendations are vital for maintaining brain health and staving off Alzheimer's:

- **Eat real food, ideally organic** — Be sure to choose organic grass fed meats and animal products. Research has shown vegetables to be particularly beneficial for slowing age-related cognitive decline due to the antioxidants they contain. Avoid processed foods of all kinds because they contain items known to be harmful to

your brain, such as refined sugar, artificial sweeteners, glutinous grains, genetically engineered ingredients and pesticides.

- **Replace refined carbohydrates with healthy fats** – Contrary to what most people think, your brain does not need carbohydrates and sugars for fuel. What it does need is healthy fats, such as saturated animal fats and animal-based omega-3s, which are far more important for optimal brain function. Avoid all trans fats and hydrogenated fats such as margarine and various butter-like spreads, as well as vegetable oils like canola and soybean oil.

Healthy fats support your mitochondria, a topic addressed more thoroughly in my book "[Fat for Fuel](#)." Healthy fats to add to your daily diet include:

Animal-based omega-3s, such as those found in krill oil and small fatty fish like anchovies and sardines	Avocados
Butter made from raw, grass fed, organic milk	Coconuts and coconut oil
Ghee (clarified butter)	Grass fed meats and pastured poultry
Olives and olive oil (Avoid cooking with olive oil. Use it cold.)	Organic pastured egg yolks
Raw cacao butter	Raw dairy
Raw nuts, such as macadamias and pecans	Seeds like black sesame, cumin, hemp and pumpkin

- **Avoid gluten and casein** – The main items to forgo in this category are wheat and pasteurized dairy, but not dairy fat such as butter. Research shows your blood-brain barrier is negatively affected by gluten. Gluten also makes your gut more permeable. This allows proteins to get into your bloodstream where they promote

autoimmunity and inflammation, both of which play a role in the development of Alzheimer's.

- **Optimize your gut flora** – You can strengthen your gut microbiome not only by abstaining from processed foods, but also by avoiding antibacterial products, antibiotics and fluoridated water. You can fortify your gut by regularly eating cultured and fermented foods, or using a high-quality probiotic.

My 2015 interview with Dr. David Perlmutter explores the compelling connection between your gut microbes and brain health, relating it to neurological diseases such as Alzheimer's.

7. Keep Your Mind Active

Keeping your mind active and mentally stimulated has been shown to be an effective antidote for resisting cognitive decline, especially as you age. Challenging yourself with mental exercise is believed to activate processes in your brain that keep your brain cells alive, support the growth of new nerve cells and foster communication among your nerve cells.

If you frequently watch TV and think of it as a form of mental stimulation, you need to know it is actually associated with mental decline.¹⁶ A few of the beneficial activities you can do – at any age – to keep your mind active include:¹⁷

- Learn something new, such as a second language or musical instrument
- Play board games, cards or online games (choosing games that foster social connection will further boost your brain health)
- Read and write on a regular basis
- Solve crossword, number or other kinds of puzzles; assemble physical puzzles
- Take a class online or at your local library or community college

8. Eliminate Toxins

You can help your brain by eliminating toxins that have been shown to negatively affect it (and the rest of your body). A few of the toxins you should avoid are:

- **Aluminum** – Aluminum can cross your blood-brain barrier and has been directly linked to Alzheimer's. Sources of aluminum include antiperspirants, nonstick cookware and vaccine adjuvants.
- **Dental amalgam fillings** – Dental amalgam fillings, which are 50% mercury by weight, are a major source of heavy metal toxicity. If you have amalgams and are in reasonably good health, review my mercury detox protocol and enlist the services of a biological dentist to remove them.
- **Flu vaccinations** – No matter what you have been told about its effectiveness and importance, carefully consider the risks before getting the flu vaccine. Many flu vaccines contain both aluminum and mercury, which are considerably more damaging to your health than the illness itself. Studies have also repeatedly shown the flu vaccine rarely works.
- **Statins and anticholinergic drugs** – Statin drugs are problematic because they suppress the synthesis of cholesterol and deplete your brain of coenzyme Q10, vitamin K2 and neurotransmitter precursors.

Drugs that block acetylcholine, a nervous system neurotransmitter, have been shown to contribute to memory loss in some individuals.^{18,19} These drugs include certain antidepressants, antihistamines, bladder-control medications, narcotic pain relievers and sleep aids.

- **Microwave radiation from cellphones and other wireless technologies** – Last year, Dr. Martin Pall published a scientific review²⁰ showing how microwave radiation from cell phones, Wi-Fi routers and computers and tablets not in airplane mode is clearly associated with many neuropsychiatric disorders, including Alzheimer's.

Microwaves emitted from devices such as these increase intracellular calcium through voltage gated calcium channels (VGCCs), and one of the tissues with the

highest density of VGCCs is your brain. Once these VGCCs are stimulated they trigger the release of neurotransmitters, neuroendocrine hormones and highly damaging reactive oxygen species, significantly raising your risk for neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's.

Based on this mechanism, it seems clear that chronic exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) can play a significant role in dementia and that as a society, we need to take this very seriously. On a personal level, be sure to limit your exposure to wireless technology. Simple measures include turning your Wi-Fi off at night, not carrying your cellphone on your body and not keeping portable phones, cellphones and other electric devices in your bedroom.

9. Meditate

Meditation helps you take a deliberate break from the stream of thoughts constantly flowing in and out of your mind. Some people use it to promote spiritual growth or find inner peace, while others use it as a powerful relaxation and stress-reduction tool.

A 2012 study published in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* asserts meditation can have a long-term effect on your mental state because it prompts changes in your amygdala, a region of your brain associated with processing emotion. The authors stated:²¹

"[Eight] weeks of training in ... meditation yielded distinct changes in amygdala activation ... This finding suggests that meditation training may affect emotional processing in everyday life, and not just during meditation. This is consistent with the hypothesis that ... meditative states ... can result in enduring changes in mental function."

Research from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine also supports the notion of meditation as a form of "mental exercise" that can help regulate your attention and emotions and improve your well-being.²²

10. Be Optimistic

A study published in *Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*²³ suggests healthy adults who have a larger orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) tend to be more optimistic and have less anxiety. Your OFC is a region of your brain located in your prefrontal cortex just behind your eyes – it plays a key role in regulating your emotions and behavior through the integration of intellectual and emotional information.

Researchers believe the size of your OFC appears to predict your tendency toward either anxiety or optimism. According to *Psychology Today*,²⁴ the study:

"[S]hows that optimism may ultimately protect [you] from anxiety by stimulating changes in the OFC. It appears that [you] can create an upward spiral by altering the gray matter volume of the OFC. In future studies, [researchers] plan to test whether optimism can be increased and anxiety reduced by training people in tasks that engage the OFC, or by finding ways to boost optimism directly."

Lead researcher Florin Dolcos, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois, believes cultivating optimistic thoughts can have a lasting effect on your brain. He said, "If you can train people's responses, the theory is that over longer periods, their ability to control their responses on a moment-by-moment basis will eventually be embedded in their brain structure."²⁵

Even One Change Can Make a Big Difference

Dementia and Alzheimer's have become so common that you may be unconsciously accepting these conditions as a natural part of aging, unfortunate family genes or both. The truth is, you can positively influence your brain. The actions I suggested above will help ensure your mind remains sharp and resilient for many years to come.

I encourage you to choose one of the suggestions and begin acting on it today. Making just one change can make a big difference in your brain health. Take care of your brain

and it will take care of you.

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