

The Surprising Benefits of Daily Book Reading

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

October 26, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Reading improves brain function, enhancing memory, concentration and language comprehension. Research suggests it delays the onset of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's by up to five years in elderly individuals
- › Reading before bedtime improves sleep quality by reducing stress, lowering heart rate and easing muscle tension. It provides a calming transition into sleep, similar to meditation
- › Daily reading helps reduce stress by distracting the mind from stressors and lowering cortisol levels. This immersion in different worlds and perspectives provides a mental break from daily pressures
- › Reading challenges and trains eyesight by exercising your ciliary muscles. According to research, reading outdoors improves visual brain cells and enhances the ability to distinguish details, benefiting overall eye health
- › Replacing screen time with book reading, especially before bed, reduces harmful blue light exposure. This helps maintain proper melatonin production and supports a healthy sleep-wake cycle

What was the last good book you read, and how many books have you already finished reading this year? If you answer more than 10, then good for you – the average American reads 12 books annually.¹

Reading is one of my favorite pastimes, because it not only provides learning and entertainment, but it's also one of the most cost-efficient hobbies you can take up. It opens you to new worlds, broadens your vocabulary and allows you to be more imaginative and creative.

But the benefits of daily reading go beyond keeping you preoccupied and entertained – it has a profound impact on various areas of your health, including your brain function, sleep quality and even stress levels.

Reading Improves Your Brain Function and Wards Off Neurodegenerative Diseases

One of the most notable benefits of reading is boosting your cognitive function. Reading stimulates you mentally, developing various areas of your brain, such as memory, concentration and more.

According to an article published on Medium,² reading every day is like going to the gym for your brain – even just a few minutes of reading, whether it's several pages or a chapter or two, will help your brain stay in shape. The video above³ offers a great explanation on how reading benefits your mind:

"Regular reading increases connectivity in the temporal cortex, a brain area responsible for language comprehension. This heightened connectivity not only improves our ability to understand and process language but also enhances empathy and emotional intelligence as we engage with diverse characters and settings.

*As we empathize with characters' experiences and emotions, our brain simulates these situations, which may lead to improved problem-solving skills and a deeper understanding of human behavior."*⁴

There are studies backing up the advantages of reading for brain function. A 2021 study⁵ conducted by researchers from Chicago, for example, found that reading and

doing other cognitive activities (such as playing board games and solving puzzles) helps delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease among the elderly by up to five years.

Published in the journal *Neurology*,⁶ the study involved 1,978 seniors with an average age of 80 who were followed for an average of seven years. The participants were given cognitive tests to determine if they have developed dementia. Based on their findings, participants with high cognitive activity developed dementia at age 94, on average, while those who have low cognitive activity developed it at age 89, on average.^{7,8} Robert S. Wilson, Ph.D., one of the study authors, said:

*"The good news is that it's never too late to start doing the kinds of inexpensive, accessible activities we looked at in our study. Our findings suggest it may be beneficial to start doing these things, even in your 80s, to delay the onset of Alzheimer's dementia."*⁹

A 14-year longitudinal study published in the journal *International Psychogeriatrics*¹⁰ also came to the same conclusion — reading frequently protects elderly people's cognitive function. According to the researchers:

*"[T]hose with higher reading frequencies (≥ 1 time a week) were less likely to have cognitive decline at six-year (adjusted odds ratio [AOR]: 0.54; 95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.34–0.86), 10-year (AOR: 0.58, 95% CI: 0.37–0.92), and 14-year (AOR: 0.54, 95% CI: 0.34–0.86); in a 14-year follow-up, a reduced risk of cognitive decline was observed among older people with higher reading frequencies versus lower ones at all educational levels."*¹¹

Reading Before Bedtime Improves Your Sleep

People who read a book every day usually do so before bedtime, and many parents also make it a habit (and a bonding experience) to read to their children before tucking them in for the night. This is because reading calms your mind — it pulls you away from the stressors you experienced during the day and reduces mental chatter.

According to the featured video,¹² reading also slows down your heart rate and reduces muscle tension, which are both essential for a good night's sleep. Furthermore, it creates a form of cognitive engagement that is similar to meditation, allowing you to smoothly transition into a state that's conducive to sleep.

A 2021 study published in the journal *Trials*¹³ looked at the effects of reading before bedtime on sleep quality. The participants were divided into two groups; the intervention group was asked to read a book before bedtime, while those in the control group were told not to read.

In the intervention group, 42% of participants reported an improvement in their sleep quality; only 28% of the participants in the control group reported the same effect.

"Reading in bed before sleep not only potentially improves overall sleep quality, but also people in the reading group experienced fewer problems staying asleep. While we did find a higher rate of daytime sleepiness in people allocated to reading a book in bed, the difference we found was very small and likely to have little impact on a person's daytime sleepiness in practice," the researchers noted.¹⁴

Engaging in a Daily Reading Habit Helps Ward Off Stress

Many people consider reading a form of therapy, and rightly so – in fact, just a few minutes or an hour or two of reading per day helps clear your mind of all the stressful events you encountered, giving you a much-needed break. As explained in the featured video:

*"When we read, we immerse ourselves in different worlds, perspectives, and narratives, which distracts our minds from current stresses and allows us to relax. This psychological shift is the first step in stress reduction, as engaging with a book requires concentration, diverting attention away from stressors and lowering the body's production of stress hormones like cortisol."*¹⁵

Cortisol's primary role in your body is to increase your blood sugar when there's insufficient glucose in your bloodstream and your liver does not have enough glycogen reserves. It's your body's protective mechanism to keep your glucose levels from dropping dangerously low, so you don't go into a hypoglycemic coma.

However, cortisol's mechanism of action also contributes to inflammation, which is why having elevated levels is undesirable. You can read more about this in my article, "[Key Strategies to Reduce Your Cortisol Levels](#)."

So, ultimately, if your body is producing high amounts of cortisol due to chronic stress or to compensate for the lack of glucose in your body (due to having low amounts of healthy carbs in your diet), this is not a state you want to be in for a prolonged period if you want to live a long and healthy life. By implementing a daily reading habit, you'll be able to lower your levels of this stress hormone. According to an article in Medium:

"High cortisol levels, often a result of chronic stress, can wreak havoc on both physical and mental health. Finding effective ways to unwind and relax is [important] for managing cortisol levels and promoting overall well-being. One often-overlooked but highly effective method is indulging in a good book, particularly fiction, before bedtime."¹⁶

Reading 'Challenges' and Trains Your Eyesight

Even if you're in a stationary position while reading a book, there's one body part that is being exercised — your eyes. Your eyes constantly move, as you shift your gaze from one text to another, then back again. This challenges your eyes and trains your ciliary muscles — the part of your eyes that part of the eye that affects your ability to see objects clearly at different distances.¹⁷

As noted by the video:¹⁸ "[Reading] may enhance the eye's ability to transition between near and far focus, a process known as 'accommodation,' which may deteriorate with age or prolonged screen time."

However, doing this activity under the right circumstances and lighting conditions is important. Make sure to read under appropriate lighting to avoid eye strain. A 2021 study^{19,20} found that reading outdoors is good for your eyesight, as it helps improve visual brain cells and helps you distinguish details better. Lead study author, Dr. Hamed Rahimi-Nasrabadi, comments:

"Findings from the investigation conclude you can now feel good when you decide to read your favorite book outdoors. You can say it is scientifically proven visual contrast increases outdoors and, therefore, reading under bright light stimulates your visual brain more effectively, allows you to see the letters better, and helps your eyesight."²¹

Reading a Book Decreases Your Gadget Use During Bedtime

Another notable advantage of reading a book is you get to spend less time on your gadgets. Most people today cannot survive an entire day without their phones. In fact, recent statistics²² say that people ages 16 to 64 spend a whopping six hours and 35 minutes daily on their electronic devices.

Particularly problematic is using these electronic devices during bedtime, which, according to the National Sleep Foundation,²³ 70% of adults and 75% of children are prone to doing. If you think that scrolling on your phone until you feel sleepy seems harmless, the fact is that the blue light these gadgets emit interferes with your melatonin production and disrupts your sleep/wake cycle.

In addition, using gadgets in the bedroom also means you're exposed to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) from electronic devices, which harm your mitochondria by producing oxidative damage.

So, rather than using your phone to induce sleepiness during bedtime, pick up where you last left off on the book that you're reading. Even 10 to 20 minutes of reading will help give you better sleep. For more about this topic, I recommend reading my article, "[Light at Night Damages Your Health and Potentially Future Generations.](#)"

Improve Your Health, One Page at a Time – Make Reading a Daily Habit

Due to the fast-paced lifestyle most people are accustomed to, taking the time to pause, sit down and read a good book is often considered an indulgent pleasure. However, you mustn't feel guilty for mellowing down and spending time with a good book. The benefits of reading are profound, as it encourages your personal growth and supports your mental health and cognition. Here are some more advantages you'll reap from a reading habit.^{24,25}

- **Improves attention span** – Reading allows you to concentrate on one activity. In today's world where multi-tasking is often the norm, being able to focus on one thing at a time helps clear unnecessary stress from your mind. As noted by an article in *The Hearty Soul*:²⁶

"Reading is an active action that demands complete concentration on deciding which passages to read first and which to skip. You'll be astounded at how much reading every day can improve your focus in just 20 minutes a day."

- **Develops your creativity** – Being introduced to new worlds, perspectives and knowledge boosts your imagination, which you can apply to your day-to-day tasks and helps improve your problem-solving skills.
- **Helps you socialize** – Use the fresh ideas and new knowledge you get from reading to start conversations or participate in discussions within your social circles.
- **Improves your writing skills** – Reading different genres from different authors allows you to explore other authors' writing styles, which you can use as an inspiration to hone your own skills.

Some people usually find it difficult to get started with reading. One of the best ways you can make this a regular part of your life is to fit it into your schedule, whether in the

daytime or at night – as highlighted above, both have profound benefits for you. Set aside 10 to 15 minutes per day for reading.

Another great idea is to create a reading nook – allot a space in your home for a mini-library, where you have easy access to your favorite reads. Finally, it's best to read what you love – selecting books that pique your interests will increase the chances that you'll read them from cover to cover.

Sources and References

- ¹ [Above and Beyond Therapy, February 21, 2024](#)
- ^{2, 24} [Medium, August 29, 2024](#)
- ³ [YouTube, Bestie Health, August 29, 2024](#)
- ⁴ [YouTube, Bestie Health, August 29, 2024, 01:02](#)
- ^{5, 6, 7} [Neurology, August 31, 2021, Volume 97, Issue \(9\), e922-e929](#)
- ^{8, 9} [American Academy of Neurology, July 14, 2021](#)
- ¹⁰ [Int Psychogeriatr. 2021 Jan; 33\(1\): 63–74](#)
- ¹¹ [Int Psychogeriatr. 2021 Jan; 33\(1\): 63–74, Results](#)
- ¹² [YouTube, Bestie Health, August 29, 2024, 10:42](#)
- ^{13, 14} [Trials. 2021; 22: 873](#)
- ¹⁵ [YouTube, Bestie Health, August 29, 2024, 04:16](#)
- ¹⁶ [Medium, March 22, 2024](#)
- ¹⁷ [NIH, August 8, 2023, Anatomy, Head and Neck, Eye Ciliary Muscles](#)
- ¹⁸ [YouTube, Bestie Health, August 29, 2024, 06:24](#)
- ^{19, 21} [StudyFinds, February 2, 2021](#)
- ²⁰ [Cell Reports, February 02, 2021, Volume 34, Issue 5, 108692](#)
- ²² [Independent, June 18, 2024](#)
- ²³ [Sleep Foundation, January 5, 2024](#)
- ^{25, 26} [The Hearty Soul, September 2, 2024](#)