

Research Finds Tips for Healthy Cognitive Aging

As the global and American populations grow older and people live longer, it is crucial to examine and comprehend how aging impacts mental processes. Even minor and occasional forgetfulness at older ages is often seen as inevitable and equated with Alzheimer's disease. The truth, however, is that the brain ages just like the rest of our body, and this cognitive aging does not have to be automatic, irresistible, or problematic, according to a recent report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM).

Staying cognitively sharp is, of course, a natural and major concern. Even subtle cognitive slowdowns can make seniors more vulnerable to scams, hinder, driving, or limit technological abilities necessary to today's work. This and other studies have found that many (but by all means all) older adults do process some information more slowly, multi-task less effectively, and experience difficulty with short term memory. But, based on this extensive examination of aging studies by IOM, these risks are NOT universal or guaranteed. Long-term memory and many other cognitive abilities typically remain throughout the cognitive aging process, and this aging is NOT a degenerative disease!

In fact, this IOM reports offers numerous evidence based suggestions for "staying sharp" while aging and generally minimizing much if not all cognitive decline. The IOM committee offers the following fundamental tips, based on extensive interdisciplinary research on public health, epidemiology, prevention, intervention, and education:

- Keep socially- and intellectually- active. The brain is like a muscle- the more you use, it the stronger it remains.
- Be physically active. The sooner, the better, but it's never too late to start.
- Control high blood pressure and diabetes, and do NOT smoke. What is bad for your heart is bad for your brain, so minimize these (and other) key risks for heart disease.
- Be aware and careful about prescription drugs. Many medications commonly taken by seniors can "fog" the brain, reducing cognition, including some anxiety, sleep, bladder control, cholesterol, and antihistamine drugs. So ask about any side effects of yours!
- Get enough sleep. Lessened sleep is a top cause of diminished cognitive ability.

Be careful about products claiming to improve mental functioning. There is no hard evidence that vitamins and supplements help, and some may have negative side effects. The jury's still out on the efficacy of computer-based "brain-training" games, too.

Editorial comments: The common perception is that all memory loss is Alzheimer's disease. This report dispels that myth and calls our attention to the more common and far less devastating problem of cognitive aging. The really important take home messages are found in the list of very wise suggestions to preserve mental abilities as we all age. The advice is equally important for the young and the old.

Bibliography

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