

Major new report establishes effective methods of enhancing and preserving brain power as we age.

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In 1900, only 4.1 percent of U.S. citizens were older than 65; in 2000 that number had jumped to 12.6 percent; and by the year 2030, 20 percent of our population could be in that category.

Cognitive decline was long seen as an inevitable consequence of aging, but recent years have seen a surge of interest in activities and products touted to forestall this outcome. What is the truth? Is decline inevitable, or is there a possibility of retaining our faculties if we exercise them? And which kinds of exercises and products are effective, and which are merely hype?

According to the most rigorous and comprehensive review of the scientific findings ever, there is clear evidence that cognitive-enrichment activities—including intellectually stimulating pursuits, social engagement, and especially physical exercise—may indeed preserve or enhance various aspects of cognitive functioning as we age. The authors of the report will discuss the findings at a press conference in Washington, DC on June 24.

In this report, the researchers point to recent studies confirming that engaging in intellectually stimulating pursuits have substantial benefits for older adults. One such study shows that every day activities, such as reading, can indeed help. Four thousand old people were recruited for a study and rated their frequency of participation in seven cognitive activities (e.g. reading magazines). The researchers conducted in-home interviews and tested the participants' cognitive function for nearly 6 years. Those who engaged in more frequent cognitive activity experienced a reduced rate of cognitive decline.

Your brain also stays in better shape if you work out. The authors of this report point to a recent study looking at 5925 women over the age of 65. Researchers assessed their physical activity by asking the women how many city blocks they walked per day and how many flights of stairs they climbed daily. The women also responded to a questionnaire detailing their participation in 33 different physical activities. Looking at the cognitive function of these women 6 to 8 years later, the researchers found that the most active women had a 30 percent reduced risk of cognitive decline. Interestingly, walking distance was associated with cognition, but walking speed was not. It seems that even moderate levels of physical activity can serve to limit declines in cognition in older adults.

Social engagement and maintaining a positive attitude are also powerful tools in deterring the arrival of dementia. Individuals who are optimistic, agreeable, open to experience, conscientious, positively motivated and goal-directed are more likely to experience successful aging. Animal research supports these findings. These studies show that exposing animals to enriched or complex environments (usually including running wheels, a multitude of toys and objects to climb, and animal companions) yields several physiological benefits, including neuronal changes in the brain.

The science in this report also debunks the old saw: “Old dogs can’t learn new tricks.” While older adults generally learn new pursuits more slowly than younger people do, they nevertheless can improve their cognitive performance by keeping their minds *and* bodies in shape.