

# Tips for Mental Fitness

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Did you know that Alzheimer's and heart disease may share some of the same risk factors? That means that leading a healthier lifestyle may improve not only your cardiovascular health, but your mental function as well. Here are some strategies for optimizing your mental fitness:

1. **Eat two to three serving of fatty fish per week.** Omega-3 fats in fish oil may protect your brain, as well as your heart. Consuming more fish oils has been shown to slow mental decline and reduce inflammation associated with Alzheimer's disease. Eat at least 5 ounces of fatty fish (like salmon) or 30 ounces of leaner fish (cod, haddock or tuna) per week. If you don't consume fish, supplemental omega-3's are the next best option.
2. **Lower your intake of bad fats.** Increased risk of Alzheimer's disease has been seen with higher intake of saturated and trans-fats. The cause is not clear, but there's enough evidence to suspect a link. Until further evidence is obtained, reducing your risk of saturated fats from high-fat meats, dairy products and trans-fats from processed foods remains a wise health strategy.
3. **Eat more leafy greens.** People consuming three servings a day of leafy greens such as kale, iceberg lettuce, romaine lettuce, and raw or cooked spinach showed a 40 percent slower rate of cognitive decline than those averaging one serving. Include leafy greens in your sandwiches, order salads when dining out, or use conveniently packaged salads and leafy greens when cooking at home.
4. **Get more vitamin E from foods.** A lower risk of cognitive decline has been shown in people consuming vitamin E from foods, but not from supplements. The best sources of Vitamin E include vegetable oils, nuts, seeds, green leafy vegetables and whole grains.
5. **Maintain healthy blood sugar.** An association has been seen between diabetes and memory impairment. Diabetes may affect brain function by harming small blood vessels in the brain, leading to small strokes. Increased insulin may also promote senile plaque formation. To optimize brain function, focus on diabetes prevention through weight loss, physical activity and healthy nutrition.

6. **Watch your waist size.** Obesity in midlife can increase risk of dementia, even without diabetes. Fat cells release hormones producing inflammation that may be harmful to the brain. Larger waist size can impair cognitive function, while decreasing waist size can improve mental function and lower risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes and certain types of cancer.
7. **Stay active.** Physical activity can have a positive effect on cognitive decline. One study showed a reduction in mental decline resulting from only 30 minutes of walking per day. It's not clear how exercise may preserve mental function, but its positive effect on arteries, heart health, blood pressure and insulin resistance make it a health strategy worth the investment.
8. **Maintain healthy blood pressure.** High blood pressure raises the risk of stroke, which can lead to brain damage and mental decline. Though many people don't believe Alzheimer's is preventable, experts now believe that risk from treatable factors such as elevated cholesterol and blood pressure outweigh that from genetics.
9. **Train your brain.** Older adults with increased levels of education or who report being more intellectually active have a decreased risk for cognitive decline, dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Experts believe that using your brain can develop a reserve that functions into your older years. Mental training can also make the brain more flexible and less vulnerable to age-related changes.
10. **Watch depression.** Evidence suggests that depression is either a risk factor or precursor for dementia. Treating depressive symptoms may not only improve depression, but may also prevent cognitive decline.

As we age and struggle to keep our bodies fit, we need to give our brain the same attention and focus. Fortunately, many of the health strategies mentioned above will promote physical as well as mental fitness. Just another reason to eat your vegetables, maintain a healthy weight, and exercise regularly 😊