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Physical Activity & Brain Health

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At some time or another you most likely have heard that exercise is beneficial for you and that you should do it regularly. For a caregiver, it can be just one more thing on the list of “must dos” for the day. Although caregiving in itself provides physical movement and builds strength, it doesn’t necessarily provide the conditioning necessary to improve (or maintain) one’s health.

Exercise, is defined as an activity requiring physical effort that is carried out to sustain or improve health and fitness.

Research shows again and again that physical activity, as a lifestyle intervention, could be an answer to preventing the onset of dementia or delaying its progression. At the 2017 Alzheimer’s Association International Convention several studies were presented highlighting lifestyle interventions that might be preventative factors in the development of dementia such as stress reduction techniques, diet, sleep, and physical activity. While many people become discouraged about Alzheimer’s disease because they feel there is little they can do to protect against it, the results of these studies suggest that engaging in moderate physical activity may slow down the progression of the disease.

Improved health with regular exercise or an active lifestyle combats several of the dementia risk factors. It has been known to help with depression, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. In addition, people who increased their moderate-intensity *physical activity* were more likely to have healthy patterns of glucose



metabolism in their brains—a sign of healthy brain *activity*—than those who did less.

If you were to make one lifestyle change, it would be most advantageous to put your efforts toward regular physical activity. However, before adopting any new exercise regime, it is very important to consider any physical limitations due to mobility, arthritis, or chronic illnesses (such as diabetes or high blood pressure).

Adults under 65 should have at least two and a half hours each week of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity. They should also do strengthening activities, such as push-ups, sit-ups, and lifting weights, at least twice each week. Happily, physical activity can be cumulative and does not need to be done all at once. Breaking exercise into shorter sessions can provide more opportunities to get your body moving, although it is important to consider that activities must be done for at least 10 minutes at a time in order to achieve health benefits. Shorter intervals do not have the same benefits.

 **Tips****For safe exercise
for those with
dementia.**

- New or complicated activities that require complex learning are not ideal; choose exercises that use and enhance their current skills and talents.
- It may be challenging to build upon physical skills, so if they are learning something with complex directions (a strength training exercise, for instance) they may need to have repetitive directions and the same exercises each session.
- It is important to repeat directions both verbally and visually, and repeat them often. Directions should be repeated the same way each time.
- Keep your voice and demeanor calm and reassuring, and avoid complicated explanations. Keep things simple and positive.
- Avoid over-stimulation such as loud or harsh music, noise, and distractions all of which can increase anxiety.

Adults 65 years and older should engage in cardiovascular exercises to elevate the heart rate if they have no conditions that would make this unsafe. Regular cardiovascular exercise will increase the blood flow to your brain and body, providing additional nourishment while reducing potential dementia risk factors, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, and a tendency toward falling. Engage in regular physical activity to improve your strength and balance.

Did you know?

- Falls are the leading cause of fatal and non-fatal injuries in older adults, and one-third of adults over age 65 fall every year.
- Falls in which your head is injured may affect your brain's ability to function normally, causing unconsciousness, confusion, and other maladies.

Remaining active is the key concept aging adults should prioritize.

Regardless of your age, if you are capable and willing to get up and move once each hour, five minutes of movement is sufficient to drive dramatic swings toward better health. If getting up every two hours is more manageable, then the duration of the movement should increase to 10 minutes. Activities can include: dusting, cleaning, slow dancing, playing guitar, stretching, washing dishes, showering, tending children, etc. If you tend to sit for long periods at a time, it is best to stand up every hour and do some form of light activity for five to ten minutes before returning to sit. This simple concept has proved to provide positive health benefits. Frequency and duration of exercise or physical activity has proved to be more important than intensity.



What type of exercise is the *best* form of exercise? When asked this question, most people tend to think of walking or swimming. Others may think of yoga or tai chi. Indeed, all of those types of movement are very good options for exercise. They are also low impact and good for increasing range of motion. But, the *very best* form of exercise (or physical activity) is the type you enjoy and will want to do regularly.

Consider physical activities that may also be mentally or socially engaging, such as walking with a friend, taking a dance class, joining an exercise group, or golfing. Incorporate activity that you find enjoyable so you will continue to engage in it. For example, bike riding, gardening, or walking the dog. Adopting healthy exercise habits today will allow you to enjoy the lifelong benefits of regular physical activity. It is never too late to start—making healthy choices at any age is beneficial to your well-being.

Research shows that health benefits can be achieved from exercise regardless of age. Lifestyle changes can begin immediately and, with consistent commitment, it can have a major impact on your health. Remember to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program, especially if you haven't exercised for a while or if you have a chronic illness like diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis. Be sure to start very slowly and increase gradually. Vary your routine to keep it interesting and fun.