Active Living Tips for Older Adults
Issue Number 3, March 2022

Brain Fitness: As Important As Body Fitness

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Remembering Mike Sharratt

The fastest growing segment of our population are those people over 65 (and especially those over 85). This wave is spreading across our planet like a 'silver tsunami'.

As we age, certain body functions slow down. Some changes are inevitable for most of us, such as grey hair, and less of it. Our lungs lose capacity and even our brains lose volume.

As our body fitness declines, must our brain fitness as well? There is no doubt that most of us over age 65 have more trouble with memory than we used to. That's especially true for short-term memory. "Where did I leave my keys?" is the common cry among us.

But the more important question is "Do I know what to do with my keys once I find them?" These questions point out the difference between normal aging and diseases such as dementia. That critical difference is reassuring to most of us.

Normal aging is not a disease.

If you allow your body to remain sedentary over the years, you will become less independent. You will also be at higher risk for chronic diseases like hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. Similarly, the unchallenged mind will

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Practical, leading edge research results applied to physical activity for older adults.

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Production of this publication was made possible through a financial contribution from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research

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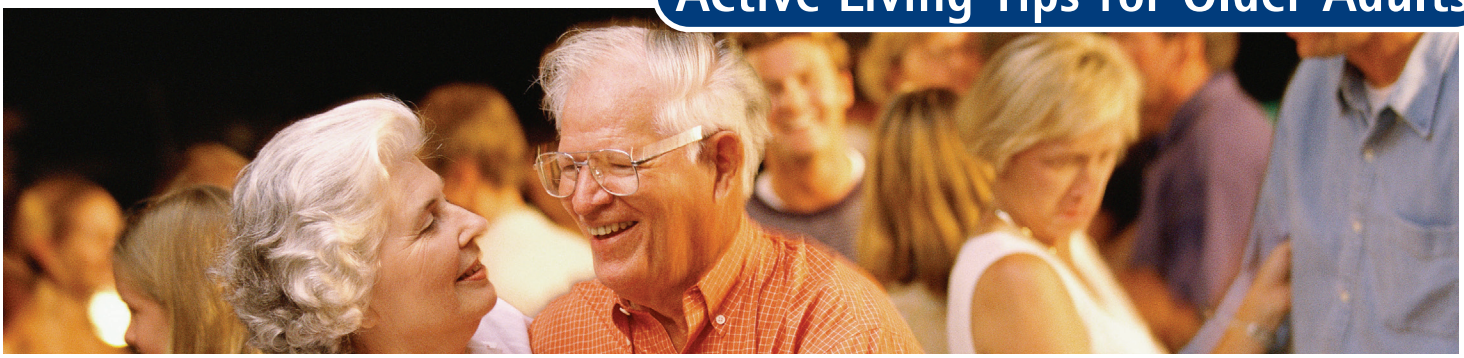

slowly lose neural connections. It will display symptoms of confusion, memory loss, and less ability to quickly process complex information.

Too many older adults simply give up. They believe the saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." That is absolutely wrong! You will be pleased to know that we have over 100 billion brain cells at maturity and 100 trillion connections between them. Yes, we can afford to lose a few as we get older.

Unfortunately, about 5% of older people develop Alzheimer's Disease or other forms of dementia. These diseases interfere with messages travelling through the brain. This "disease state" speeds up the loss of brain function in the same way that hypertension, diabetes and heart disease can speed up the loss of body function.

The body and brain are interconnected, so chronic diseases in the body can also impair mental function.

Can we slow down or reverse some of the normal cognitive decline with aging?

Yes, we can! Strong evidence has shown that the brain can "re-wire" itself. This capacity of the brain to change in response to stimulation is called neuroplasticity.

Neuroplasticity comes into play when you must pay close attention and focus on learning a new task. Learning a new computer skill or another language are examples of this.

Many companies promote games like Sudoku and crossword puzzles with claims of enhancing brain fitness. How can we assess these claims realistically? It does appear that practice can increase a person's skills in each of these games. But there is no convincing evidence that the gains in one game will transfer to the brain as a whole. It is like exercising one arm only and ignoring the muscles in the rest of your body.

What is good for the body is also good for the brain — and vice-versa.

Most experts agree that light to moderate physical activity is one of the best protectors against the loss of both body and brain function. In fact, the ideal recipe for enhanced brain function may be the combination of physical activity, intellectual stimulation, and social interaction, all at the same time. Keep in mind that a heart-healthy diet is also a brain-healthy diet and may help to preserve memory and thinking skills.

Here is an example of an activity that contributes to both body and brain fitness:

- You and a friend go for regular brisk walks together. Along the way, you play funny little games that stretch the mind, like "How many four-legged animals can you name?", or "If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?"

By combining physical, intellectual, and social activity with good diet, you are building a 'cognitive reserve' – kind of like an RRSP for the brain. This may well delay the onset of the normal symptoms of aging.

This article was originally printed in 2011. The links and contact information have been updated, but the contents may not entirely reflect current scientific research.

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