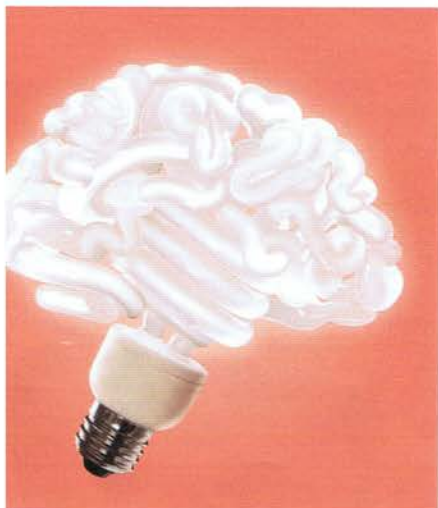


The Brain Equation

Making tiny tweaks to the daily routine will help your mind **STAY SHARP** now and in the future.



IT'S A COMMON scenario: You run upstairs to get something, and by the time you reach the top, you realize that you haven't the foggiest recollection of what you were looking for. With so much to remember—from passwords to where the car is parked—we all experience information overload that can leave us feeling like we're suffering from early-onset dementia. But it doesn't have to be that way.

"Your brain is just like the rest of your body. Its health and how it ages are under your control in many ways," says Gary Small, M.D., director of the UCLA Longevity Center and author of *The Alzheimer's Prevention Program* (Workman; 2012). In fact, your habits can influence brain function as much as your genes can. So instead of watching as the figurative lightbulb over your head dims to a weak flicker, use

these moves to keep your mind in top form. May you never again search the house for your sunglasses, only to realize they're perched atop your head.

HIT THE WEIGHTS

While studies have shown that a heart-thumping aerobic workout increases connections among neurons, new research is revealing that slow-and-steady strength training may also be beneficial. Just one or two weekly sessions with free-weights or resistance training can enhance brain function and decision-making skills, a recent study from the University of British Columbia found. Moreover, emerging research suggests that resistance training can up levels of BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), a protein that nourishes neurons. "It's like Miracle-Gro for the brain," says Terry Eckmann, a professor of human performance at Minot State University, in North Dakota.

NEVER STOP LEARNING

Doing easy, routine tasks isn't the gateway to a better brain. Research suggests that when you try something new—whether it's a foreign language, a recently discovered recipe, or just a different knitting stitch or yoga pose—"you lay down fresh neural connections, creating more

branches between the neurons and maybe even growing new ones," says Cynthia Green, author of *30 Days to Total Brain Health* (Memory Arts; 2011). Working rapidly can boost your brain power, too: "Rather than just doing the crossword puzzle at your leisure, time yourself," she says. "Any game you do against the clock forces your brain to work more quickly and think flexibly."

SPICE THINGS UP

The latest research suggests that a sprinkle of spice is good for your noodle. "Turmeric is a potent anti-inflammatory that may protect the brain from Alzheimer's disease," Small says. "Researchers have actually found that people who frequently eat Indian curries perform better on memory tests, and Indians do have lower rates of Alzheimer's." Cumin has both anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects, and both cinnamon and oregano have potent antioxidant benefits. "These spices haven't been fully studied, but we know they aren't harmful, so it's worth adding them to your diet," Small says.

KEEP IT CLEAN

A large-scale observational study recently published in the journal *Neurology* found a potential link between exposure to pesticides and cognitive decline. After following more

than 3,000 participants over a 10-year period, researchers found a correlation between those with the most pesticide exposure (mainly people who work in agriculture) and an increased risk of dementia and Alzheimer's. How this relates to the general public is yet to be determined, but if you're concerned, you can limit exposure to pesticides by buying organic produce. The Environmental Working Group, a research nonprofit, lists those fruits and vegetables with the highest levels of pesticide residue at ewg.org/foodnews/summary.

STAY CONNECTED

The gift of gab might truly be a gift: Ongoing studies show that people who are socially engaged stay sharper as they age, although researchers aren't certain why. "It could be that it goes hand in hand with being more intellectually challenged," Green says. In fact, social interactions that require you to adopt another person's viewpoint can help strengthen the brain, according to a study at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. Maybe that's the silver lining to keep in mind the next time you find yourself arguing about whether to watch MSNBC or Fox News.