

What factors protect against memory loss?

As we age we often seek ways to prevent or protect against cognitive decline. In today's world of technology, iPads, smart phones, and computers many older adults are being drawn to using websites such as Lumosity.com or Cogmed.com. These sites claim to provide brain training activities that prevent or slow memory loss and the onset of dementia. Some sites additionally claim that their brain activities improve cognitive impairments that occur due to stroke, head injuries, and chemotherapy, among other health conditions. Yet, these websites' claims do not always hold up. Scientific America reported in their July/August 2015 edition that industry claims that computer games are scientifically "proved" are misleading at best and that for healthier aging, time is better spent on exercising and social engagement.

One site was recently charged by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for deceiving users. The FTC found the site's claims that their brain activities prevent and improve memory loss to be unsupported by current research. In short, consumers have been misled by the company's advertising. There is not enough evidence out there to support that these websites' activities improve memory in the ways that they claim to do. This site will be paying two million dollars to settle the FTC charges and in the future will be required to provide solid evidence about the effects of their brain activities to their users. You can read more about the FTC's case at www.ftc.gov.

So, what can we do to prevent memory loss and the onset of dementia and Alzheimer's disease? Currently, research indicates that regular exercise and a healthy diet are the strongest protective factors when it comes to slowing cognitive decline as we age. It is important to remember that like the rest of our body, our brain ages and it is normal to notice our cognitive abilities slowing down with. Exercise and a healthy diet with limited fats and sugars are ways we care for our physical health, and they are also effective ways to care for our brain and our cognitive health.

Other factors that have been found by research to play a role in cognitive changes experienced with age include sleep and stress. It is recommended that getting at least four straight hours of sleep allows our body to go through a full sleep cycle, which in turn allows for us to feel more rested when we wake up in the morning. If you notice difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, the following are some tips on ways to practice healthy sleep hygiene and get your body into a consistent sleep routine:

Healthy Sleep Hygiene

BEFORE BEDTIME

- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol before bedtime
- Avoid heavy meals within two hours of bedtime
- Avoid energetic exercise within three hours of bedtime

GETTING READY TO SLEEP

- Develop a bedtime ritual so that your body knows you are getting ready to go to sleep
- Reduce extreme light, temperature, and noise in your bedroom
- Include an hour of quiet time before bed such as reading, watching TV or listening to music

SLEEP TIME

- Keep your sleep regular – same bedtime, same rise time. Aim for 8 hours of sleep each night.
- Bedrooms are **ONLY** for sleep and sex. How many screens do you have in your bedroom?
- If you can't sleep after 20 minutes, get up and do something boring until you feel tired, then try again.

Remember everyone has nights where they can't sleep. The more you worry, the worse this worry can become. If you are concerned about your sleep contact your family doctor.

Sleep Disordered Breathing Unit
Respiratory Services

<http://www.healthnavigator.org.nz>

Additionally, when stressors enter our lives (e.g. depression, anxiety, caring for family, finances) they can impact our cognitive abilities such as our memory. Coping with these stressors can be an important factor in protecting against memory loss and cognitive decline. Finding social support, engaging in self-care, or participating in therapy are just a few of the ways to cope with stressors.

Keeping our brain healthy is very similar to the way we keep our bodies healthy. Eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, and getting support around daily stressors are the best ways we can care for our minds and are factors that play a role in memory loss as we age.

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