

BRAIN FLEXIBILITY

Do you sometimes feel like your brain has shrunk to the size of a walnut? Is it becoming more and more difficult to remember what you had at your last meal, what you walked into a room to retrieve, or what you just read? In conversation do you struggle to express yourself because simple words of everyday language escape you only to be remembered later when the conversation is over?

You are not alone. A weakening mind is becoming a much more common complaint in Doctor's offices—more than ever before. Our modern lifestyle of high stress, sleep deprivation, and a highly inflammatory diet that causes oxidative stress has us by the throat (or the brain)!

How to Protect Your Brain

Sleep more. The first step is to get to bed early and sleep as long as your physical constitution requires for optimal functioning. Most people need 8 solid hours, some 10, and for some, 6 or 7 hours is perfectly adequate. It's best if you can sleep continuously through the night, or at least 5 hrs straight without getting up for any reason. Oil up. Omega 3 fats are crucial for brain protection.

The fatty acids of DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) help to combat oxidation and inflammation and enhance flexibility and strength of the brain by keeping the membranes around the neurons flexible, which enhances better communication along neural pathways. Since oxidation and inflammation can cause damage in both the body and brain, all sources of antioxidants (such as omega 3 fatty acids) are important for protection.

Exercise more. The benefits of exercise are numerous. You may have heard it said that the fountain of youth is found in exercise. This is true, not only for the body, but for the brain. The increased circulation gets more blood flowing to the brain, which improves its functioning and memory, and lifting brain fog. When exercising, endorphins are also released in the brain that make us feel happier and more at ease. One study done at the University of British Columbia found that regular aerobic exer-

cise appears to boost the size of the hippocampus (the part of the brain involved in learning and verbal memory).

Exercise helps reduce insulin resistance, reduces stress and anxiety, improves mood, reduces inflammation and stimulates the release of chemicals in the brain critical to brain cells—their survival as well as the growth of new blood vessels in the brain.

Brain Teasers. Brain teasers let you flex your gray matter in a number of ways. They aid in concentration, memory, mental acuity, problem solving, and improve mental flexibility. One study showed that working on brain teasers 10 hours per week delayed the onset of dementia by 7 years.

Test your brain. Are you getting the jokes? If you have difficulty getting jokes, especially immediately when they are told, this is a good indicator your brain may need some extra care. Studies have shown that when a joke is told, the brain gets a workout—in processing and understanding the joke. During a humor experiment, researchers observed some specific activities. The left side of the cortex analyzed the words and structure of the joke. The frontal lobe became very active. Then the right hemisphere of the cortex carried out the intellectual analysis required to “get” the joke. The brainwave activity then spread to the sensory processing area of the occipital lobe, and stimulation of motor sections evoked physical responses to the joke, creating an electrical wave that moves through the cerebral cortex. If the wave took a negative charge, it would result in laughter. It's also very beneficial to “get” the jokes, since laughter also helps the brain by releasing endorphins, reducing stress and inflammation.

Implementing these few changes and/or additions into your daily life can go a long way to keep your brain protected, sharp and flexible. ♦