

PARISH NURSE'S NOTES – SEPTEMBER 2021

September is World Alzheimer's Month

Every September, people come together from all around the world to raise awareness and to challenge the stigma that persists around dementia. September 2021 marks the 10th year of this vital global awareness raising campaign. September 21st also marks World Alzheimer's Day. The foods we eat can have a big impact on the structure and health of our brains. Eating a brain-boosting diet can support both short- and long-term brain function.

Here are some of the best brain foods:

1. Oily Fish
2. Dark Chocolate
3. Berries
4. Nuts and Seeds
5. Whole Grains
6. Coffee

22 brain exercises to improve memory, cognition, and creativity

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The brain is the most complex organ of the body. It regulates multiple bodily functions, interprets incoming sensory information, and processes our emotions. It is also the seat of memory, intelligence, and creativity.

Although the brain gets plenty of exercise every day, certain activities may help boost brain function and connectivity. This in turn may help protect the brain from age-related degeneration.

The brain is always active, even during sleep. However, certain activities can engage the brain in new ways, potentially leading to improvements in memory, cognitive function, or creativity.

This article outlines 22 brain exercises that may help boost memory, cognition, and creativity.

1. Meditation

Meditation generally involves focusing attention in a calm, controlled way. Meditating may have multiple benefits for both the brain and the body. According to the *National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health*, research suggests that meditation may benefit the brain by slowing brain aging and increasing the brain's ability to process information.

2. Visualizing more

Visualization involves forming a mental image to represent information. The mental image may be in the form of pictures or animated scenes. A *2018 review Trusted Source* notes that visualization helps people organize information and make appropriate decisions.

People can practice visualization in their day-to-day lives. For example, before going shopping, people can visualize how they will get to and from the grocery store, and imagine what they will buy when they get there. The key is to imagine the scenes vividly and in as much detail as possible.

3. Playing games

Playing card games or board games can be a fun way to socialize or pass the time. These activities may also be beneficial for the brain. A *2017 study Trusted Source* found a link between playing games and a decreased risk of cognitive impairment in older adults.

4. Playing memory card games

Memory card games test a person's short-term memory and ability to remember patterns. They are a simple and fun way to engage the brain and activate areas related to pattern recognition and recall.

5. Practicing crossword puzzles

Crossword puzzles are a popular activity that may stimulate the brain. An older *study from 2011 Trusted Source* notes that crossword puzzles may delay the onset of memory decline in people with preclinical dementia.

6. Completing jigsaw puzzles

Completing a jigsaw puzzle can be a good way to pass the time and may also benefit the brain. A *2018 study Trusted Source* found that puzzles activate many cognitive functions, including:

- perception
- mental rotation
- working memory
- reasoning

The study concluded that doing jigsaw puzzles regularly and throughout life may protect against the effects of brain aging.

7. Playing sudoku

Number puzzles, such as sudoku, can be a fun way to challenge the brain. They may also improve cognitive function in some people. A *2019 study Trusted Source* of adults aged between 50 and 93 years found that those who practiced number puzzles more frequently tended to have better cognitive function.

8. Playing chess

A 2016 *meta-analysis* notes that chess and other cognitive leisure activities may lead to improvements in:

- memory
- executive functioning, which is the ability to monitor and adapt behavior in order to meet set goals
- information processing speed

9. Playing checkers

A 2015 *study* *Trusted Source* found that there is a connection between regular participation in checkers or other cognitively stimulating games and larger brain volume and improved markers of cognitive health in people at risk of Alzheimer's disease.

10. Playing video games

A 2015 review notes that some types of video games — such as action, puzzle, and strategy games — may lead to improvements in the following:

- attention
- problem solving
- cognitive flexibility

11. Socializing

Enjoying the company of friends may be a mentally engaging leisure activity and may help preserve cognitive function. A 2019 study found that people with more frequent social contact were less likely to experience cognitive decline and dementia.

Some social activities that may help stimulate the brain include:

- having discussions
- playing games
- participating in social sports

12. Learning new skills

Learning new skills engages the brain in different ways and may help improve brain function.

A 2014 *study* *Trusted Source* of older adults found that learning a new and cognitively demanding skill, such as quilting or photography, enhanced memory function.

13. Increasing personal vocabulary

Increasing one's vocabulary range is a great way to broaden knowledge while exercising the brain.

A simple way to increase vocabulary is to read a book or watch a TV program and note down any words that are unfamiliar. A person can then use a dictionary to look up the meaning of the word and think up ways to use the word in a sentence.

14. Learning a new language

“Bilingualism” refers to the ability to speak two languages.

A 2019 review *Trusted Source* notes that bilingualism increases and strengthens connectivity between different areas of the brain. The researchers propose that this enhanced connectivity may play a role in delaying the onset of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia.

15. Listening to music

A 2018 study published in *Brain Sciences* found that listening to music a person enjoys engages and connects different parts of the brain.

The researchers propose that this may lead to improvements in cognitive function and overall well-being.

16. Learning a musical instrument

Learning an instrument exercises parts of the brain that are responsible for coordination.

According to a 2014 study, playing an instrument may benefit cognitive development in a young brain and help protect against cognitive impairment in an aging brain.

17. Taking up engaging hobbies

Taking up a new hobby can be mentally stimulating and exercise the brain in new ways.

Hobbies that require coordination or dexterity will activate a person’s motor skills. Such hobbies may include:

- knitting
- embroidery
- drawing
- painting
- dancing
- learning a musical instrument

18. Exercising regularly

Regular physical exercise is beneficial for both the brain and the body. Authors of a 2019 review note that exercise improves the following aspects of brain health:

- memory
- cognition
- motor coordination

19. Dancing

According to the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*, exercise has beneficial effects on the following aspects of cognitive health:

- memory
- planning
- organization

Dance is a form of exercise that may also engage areas of the brain involved in rhythm and balance.

20. Engaging in sports

Certain sports are both physically and mentally demanding. Some require a range of cognitive skills, such as:

- sustained attention
- planning
- multitasking
- the ability to adapt rapidly to changing situations

A *2019 review* notes that elite athletes who participate in high demand sports tend to have improved attention and faster information processing speeds.

21. Practicing tai chi

Tai chi is a form of physical exercise that involves gentle body movements, rhythmic breathing, and meditation.

A *2019 study Trusted Source* compared brain function and connectivity among tai chi practitioners and those who did not practice it.

The researchers found that the tai chi practitioners had enhanced connectivity between different regions of their brain. They proposed that this may improve cognition and decrease the rate of memory loss.

22. Sleeping

While not necessarily an active exercise, sleep is crucial for both the brain and the body.

According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, most adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep each night, although many people get less sleep than they need.

A *2015 review Trusted Source* notes that sleep has been proven to:

- boost memory recall
- reduce mental fatigue
- regulate metabolism

As such, making sure to get enough sleep each night is an important step toward maintaining a healthy brain.

Summary

Brain exercises can be as simple as actively engaging the brain in everyday tasks. Others are targeted workouts for the brain, specifically designed to enhance memory, cognition, or creativity.

Exercising the brain may help improve brain function and boost connectivity between the different areas. This may help protect the brain from age-related degeneration. People are likely to differ in terms of the brain exercises they find most enjoyable. It may be a good idea to try a range of brain-training activities at first and to stick with those that provide the most enjoyment or reward.