





Slim Down Sharpen Up

If you're puzzled by how to prevent memory loss, recent research indicates that losing weight may be part of the solution.

BY FRANCESCA LUNZER KRITZ

Does being overweight put you at risk for developing a memory disorder? The latest research suggests that it does. According to a study published in the *British Medical Journal*, people who were overweight in their 40s were 35 percent more likely to develop a memory disorder later in life than were normal-weight individuals; those who were obese had a 74 percent greater risk.

Overweight or not, memory changes don't necessarily indicate a serious disorder. Stress, fatigue, anxiety, and depression can all affect your ability to remember. So if you find yourself forgetting the name of a family member more often than you used to, don't

panic: An occasional memory lapse doesn't mean you're destined to lose your mental faculties or develop dementia, a condition caused by the death of nerve cells in the brain. Dementia generally entails the loss of memory and reasoning skills; symptoms may include personality, mood, and behavioral changes. For dementia to be diagnosed, the changes must be significant enough to affect one's ability to perform everyday tasks, such as baking a cake or balancing a checkbook.

There are many causes of dementia, the most common being Alzheimer's disease. It is estimated that one in ten people over age 65 and as many as one in two people over age 85 have Alzheimer's. Since less than 5 percent of cases can be attributed to a known genetic mutation, some researchers are turning their attention to the role that lifestyle factors might play.

Mind Your Health

You're probably aware that obesity increases your risk of developing a host of ailments, including hypertension, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome. Developing any one of them not only puts you at risk for heart attacks and strokes but also ups your chances of developing dementia as you age.

■ **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE** can interfere with blood flow to the brain, thereby killing

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WHY SO FORGETFUL?

Several conditions can impair memory and erode judgment, reasoning, and language skills. Among them are the following:

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE A degenerative condition that may be caused by a buildup of plaques in the brain

DEMENTIA WITH LEWY BODIES A neurodegenerative disorder that is marked by the presence of certain proteins (Lewy bodies) in the brain

VASCULAR (MULTI-INFARCT) DEMENTIA Cutting off blood flow to the brain as a result of a stroke or mini-strokes

PARKINSON'S DISEASE A deterioration of nerve cells in the brain, characterized by muscle stiffness and tremors

SEVERE HEAD TRAUMA Trauma-induced damage to brain tissue and/or bleeding, bruising, and resulting seizures

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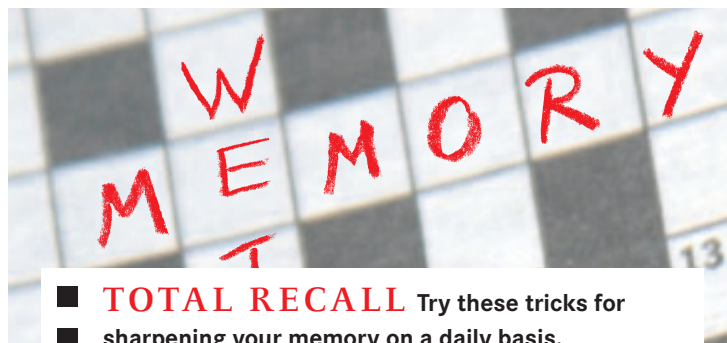
peppers, kale, spinach, broccoli, and beets may protect brain cells, thanks to high levels of antioxidants. Other brain-healthy picks include nuts and seeds such as walnuts, almonds, and sunflower and pumpkin seeds. Also, don't forget the fish: A 2003 study published in the *Archives of Neurology* found that eating fish at least once a week was associated with a 60 percent reduced risk of developing Alzheimer's. Cold-water fish, such as salmon, mackerel, and tuna are especially rich in omega-3s.

A Workout for Your Brain

If you're trying to lose weight, you may be hitting the gym in the hope that it will help you slim down. Keep going, and your brain may see the payoff, too. Exercise boosts blood flow to the brain and encourages the growth of new brain cells. And since exercise may reduce your chances of developing diabetes or suffering a stroke—which increase your risk of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia—it potentially offers you a two-pronged approach to fighting cognitive decline, says Deborah Barnes, Ph.D., a research fellow in aging at the University of California at San Francisco.

Q I hate getting sweaty. Can less-intense exercise also help me maintain brain function?

A Yes, just keep moving. Several studies have found that people who walk regularly have a decreased risk of dementia. In one study, women in their 70s and 80s who walked for at least 1½ hours a week scored higher on cognitive tests than those who walked for less than 40 minutes a week. Plotting your route, observing traffic signals, and interacting with a walking companion all provide additional value for brain health.



- **TOTAL RECALL** Try these tricks for sharpening your memory on a daily basis.
- **IT'S A DATE** Afraid you'll forget an important event? Visualize a billboard with the name and date of the occasion, pictures of the guests and the location, and a clock set to the starting time, says Aaron Nelson, co-author of *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Achieving Optimal Memory* (McGraw Hill, 2005).
- **MIX IT UP** Get off the beaten path and take a new route to work once a week. At your desk, change your computer wallpaper often.
- **NAME THAT FRIEND** When you meet someone new, think of an image to go with the person's name: If someone's last name is Woode, for example, picture her sanding wood or running through the woods.

Think Again (and Again)

That old adage "use it or lose it" is especially true when it comes to maintaining your brain as you age. Keeping your brain active may build your reserve of brain cells, increase connections between cells, and possibly generate new cells. A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that people who did activities such as crossword puzzles and board games had a reduced risk of dementia. Not into games? Play a musical instrument or go shopping (it forces you to make decisions about where to go and what to buy).

The idea is to challenge your mind, whatever your age: Why not study a new language, join a poker group, or take a cooking class? If you're too busy, think smaller. "Move your wastebasket every few weeks," says Elizabeth Edgerly, Ph.D., co-developer for the Alzheimer's Association's Maintain Your Brain workshop. "Your brain has to think about where it is and plot the course to get there." Other brain builders: Read a variety of magazines, attend lectures, or record your thoughts in a journal. ■