

TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Out-Patient Clinic

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“BRAIN GAMES” by Susan Cusson, NP

The brain ages, just like the rest of the body. The rate of aging varies from person to person, many factors influence the rate and severity of decline. Some factors, like genetics, medical history or past exposure to toxins, we have little or no control over. Research shows there are other factors that affect how our brain ages. Stress, lifestyle, physical and mental activity and diet are factors we *can* and *should* control if we want to preserve mental acuity as long as possible.

There’s a lot of buzz about using brain training websites such as Lumosity, or other “brain games” like Sudoku and crossword puzzles to delay cognitive decline, but do they really help? According to cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Sandra Bond Chapman, Chief Director of the Center for BrainHealth, University of Texas at Dallas, the answer is yes and no. Games sure seem like a good way to boost your “brain health” but it’s not quite that simple. They target very specific cognitive abilities, but the effect is only within the area trained. For example, if you do a lot of crossword puzzles, you might get really good at crossword puzzles. The same goes for any other game. The benefit isn’t seen in other areas such as problem solving or critical thinking. These are the complex skills that really matter in keeping your brain “real world” strong.

Games are fun and engaging and there’s no harm in doing them, but a broader approach is more likely to result in better long-term outcomes. Research shows that aerobic exercise plays an important role in your brain health. When your cardiovascular fitness improves, your

circulation improves and more nutrients and oxygen are getting to your brain. Certain parts of the brain seem to be especially sensitive to the effects of exercise. The frontal lobe, an area responsible for high-level skills related to complex processes such as decision-making, planning and judgment -- functions that allow us to carry out our daily lives, seems to benefit more than other areas. Any activity you enjoy such as gardening, hiking or walking briskly, as long as it makes you sweat a little and gets your heart rate up, that’s what your brain needs. Skip the Sudoku and get out and exercise!

Along with aerobic exercise, engaging your brain in complex ways is absolutely necessary to keep your mind sharp in the second half of life. Research shows that activities provide more benefit if they are truly meaningful. Practicing a foreign language for 30 minutes a day is a good way to challenge your brain but if it’s not genuinely appealing to you then your mind won’t benefit as much as something that truly interests you. Watching a TV show or movie in itself might not provide much in the way of mental challenge, but engaging in conversation with others afterwards, dissecting the information and discussing what matters, challenges your brain to use critical thinking. Social engagement has also been shown to lower the rates of depression and cognitive decline. One recent study from the Rush Alzheimer’s Disease Center in Chicago found that highly social seniors had a 70 percent lower rate of cognitive decline than their less social peers. A recent article in AARP (March 2015) promoted the benefits of playing bridge.



The intellectual challenge and problem solving, as well as the social stimulation make it an appealing activity to many. A great way to have fun and exercise your brain!

Research shows that our brain can only do one thing well at a time. While we may feel we're more efficient if we "multitask", we may not be doing ourselves any favors. Multitasking may actually cause us to be less efficient and lead to other harmful effects such as brain fatigue and increased stress. Stress can in turn lead to an increase in cortisol levels. Cortisol is a stress hormone that is known to have negative effects on the memory center of the brain. Give your brain some downtime through meditation or yoga and adequate sleep.



Your brain is the most complex and truly amazing organ in your body, here are some practical steps to help protect your brain from aging:

- Eat a brain healthy diet high in antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables, whole grains and omega-3 fatty acids from cold water fish and nuts.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Exercise regularly at least 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week.
- Get prompt treatment for health problems that can affect the brain, such as diabetes, high cholesterol, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure.
- Avoid smoking, exposure to environmental toxins, and excess alcohol (more than 2 drinks per day).
- Look after your mental health by staying socially engaged and intellectually stimulated, reducing stress, and getting treatment for mood and anxiety disorders. (MGH Mind, Mood & Memory August 2014)

Commercial brain games that promise to improve memory, processing speed and

problem-solving are describe as being backed by solid scientific evidence. According to a statement released in October 2014 by the Stanford Center on Longevity in Palo Alto, California and the Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin, a group of nearly 70 researchers asserted there is "little evidence that playing brain games improves underlying broad cognitive abilities or that it enables one to better navigate a complex realm of everyday life". The positive effects from brain games, just like physical workouts, fade away when you stop doing the activity and your brain loses the immediate gains. Play these games for fun but don't make it a chore in order to postpone cognitive aging. You're better off going outdoors to take a walk!

Health Education Lecture

On Thursday, April 2, 2015

Dr. Eric Mahoney

will give a presentation on
"Abdominal Pain"

Dr. Mahoney is an experienced general surgeon who is highly regarded and respected by his colleagues and patients. He is affiliated with Emerson Hospital and practices at Walden Surgical Associates. This talk will include information about hernias and diverticulitis. Please join us for this very informative talk. Auditorium Center 10:30am—11:30 am

Spring Healing Discount!

Acupressure with

Barbara Blanchard

30 minutes of Acupressure for \$30.00 during the month of April only.

Acupressure is

"Acupuncture without needles"

Available Monday afternoons.

Call the Clinic to schedule an appointment.