

Scientists find no proven techniques or nutrients that halt onset

# Hoping to slow the advance of dementia? Forget about it

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It is a thought that crosses many middle-aged minds when a word is forgotten or a set of keys misplaced: Is this a fluke, or the first sign of dementia?

"Most of us will experience some cognitive changes with age," said Molly Wagster, chief of the behavioral and systems neuroscience branch of the National Institute on Aging (NIA), who likens such mental changes to the gradual slowing of a marathon runner's race times with advancing years.

The ability to call up words is one of the first things to slip: "You might find it more difficult to recall someone's name or the name of a book you read or favorite movie. Eventually, you will remember it, but it takes a little longer," Wagster said.

Such problems are naturally irritating and frustrating, but they are usually not a sign that your mind is going, according to Wagster.

Still, most of us would like to retain our mental acuity as we age. Isn't there something we can do that is proven to keep our minds sharp?

Right now, the short answer is no.

"There are a lot of things that have some evidence behind them, but it's hard to find interventions that have convincing evidence behind them," said Victor Henderson, a neurologist who studies cognitive aging at Stanford University Medical School.

Physical activity seems like the most promising thing you can do to keep your brain at its best, Henderson said.

The evidence comes mostly from observational studies rather than the randomized, controlled trials that are considered the gold standard, but it is consistent.

People who engage in aerobic activity — for instance, walking several times per week — show improvements in their cognitive

circulation don't just up your chance of a heart attack, they also can reduce the blood flow to your brain, and that puts you at risk for dementia.

Diet is another promising way to reduce your dementia risk, Ryan pointed out.

A 2009 study of more than 1,300 people found that people who ate a Mediterranean diet — low in saturated fats and red meat and rich in vegetables, fish, whole grains and omega-3 fatty acids — had a lower risk than others of developing mild cognitive impairment.

"We can't say for sure that this will help," Ryan said, but improving your overall health seems like a reasonable way to promote healthy aging of the brain.

The Internet is packed with advertisements for supplements, vitamins and other products that promise to keep your memory sharp, but science so far has found little proof to support such claims.

After reviewing studies on interventions to stop or prevent cognitive decline, Raza Naqvi, a fellow in geriatric medicine at the University of Toronto in Canada, concluded that there was no strong evidence for any

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of the herbal products or supplements that are often touted for this purpose.

And medicines that once seemed promising for slowing memory loss in old age — such as estrogen and anti-inflammatory drugs — seemed to do more harm than good, Naqvi's review found.

A study that appeared this year in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showed that high doses of a cocktail of vitamins that included folic acid, vitamin B6 and vitamin B12 slowed the atrophy of regions of the brain thought to be especially vulnerable to Al-

als," she said. "I would not recommend that people go out and start taking high levels of B vitamins."

The approach that came out on top in Naqvi's review was cognitive training exercises — mental workouts designed to improve memory.

"Three really different studies looked at different ways of stimulating the brain, and all three showed that memory was better in the treatment group than in the controls," Naqvi said. "The challenge is: How do we translate this into things we can do in everyday life?"

Right now, the evidence is not sufficiently strong to recommend one form of cognitive activity over another form, Henderson said.

The computer games that researchers have used in studies may be thoughtfully designed, "but whether they are better than reading a book or having an engaging conversation with someone, or learning to play a musical instrument or speak a new language — we're not at a stage where we can recommend one over the other," Henderson said.

So while scientists do the "fur-

ther studies" that need doing, what is an aging mind to do?

- Skip the nutritional supplements and vitamin pills that you think are helping your brain, say the experts.

- Instead, eat a healthful diet and engage in social interactions and mentally challenging activities.

- And do some kind of regular aerobic activity — about 30 minutes, five days per week, according to Henderson.

These steps won't guarantee that you won't forget the name of that book you want to recommend to a friend, but they are unlikely to hurt.