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Brain Health: It's not all in your head

It's not enough to have rock-solid abs and shapely pectorals on your wish list for the new year.

Now you need to go for the cerebral burn and work out your brain, too.

During the past few years, there's been an avalanche of books, programs and electronic devices to help people who are worried about brain fitness - read: baby boomers - keep their edge.

So far, studies linking any specific brain calisthenics to long-term mental sharpness are still small and sketchy, but scientists agree on this: The "use it or lose it" principle applies to brain cells as well as muscles.

But Paul Aravich, an associate professor of anatomy at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, said being "brain fit" requires more than a diet of crossword puzzles and computer games. And it should be a life-long endeavor, rather than a cram session when you lose your keys for the first time.

It starts - sorry, couch potatoes - with the other kind of fitness, physical exercise. Pumping oxygen to the brain not only helps sharpen your mind in the short run but wards off heart disease and strokes that can dull thinking and memory in the long run.

Nutrition, too, is important, because good health is linked to sharp brains. Antioxidants protect against cell damage, and omega-3 fatty acids improve brain function. Focus on grains, fruits, vegetables, fish.

That brings us to mental stimulation, which is what usually comes to mind when you hear about brain exercises.

Crossword puzzles. Sudoku. Board games. Reading books. Traveling. Learning a language. Taking up a musical instrument. Learning to tango. Trying yoga.

Newer versions of brain exercise are electronic gadgets and online programs - like Nintendo's Brain Age, MindFit, MyBrainBuilder - that claim to improve your memory and reasoning.

There have been so many such products, in fact, that California educator and businessman Alvaro Fernandez teamed with neuroscientist Elkhonon Goldberg in 2006 to set up a Web site - www.sharpbrains.com [1] - to help people weed through brain fitness ideas. The site also markets online programs the SharpBrains company's advisory board believes are effective.

During the past 10 years, cognitive training has been developed to help restore the mental abilities of people with strokes and other brain injuries, Fernandez said. Some of the same principles can be used to improve uninjured brains.

Some games are purely for fun; others are backed by science and help people improve specific functions

like memory, reasoning, attention and processing skills.

A couple of key components to keep in mind, whether you're going for newfangled electronics or old-fashioned board games:

Try progressively harder activities, instead of dwelling on the same easy levels. If you're trying an electronic game or computer program, find one that not only has different levels but tests whether you're improving your brain function.

Vary the types of mental stimulation you get. If you're an artist, try doing something with math, like organizing a fundraiser. If you're an accountant, try writing.

Try something new, rather than the same game, hobby, work skill - even route to work - over and over. Patricia Farish Lacey, who conducts "Maintain Your Brain" workshops for the local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, advises: "Step out of your box. Constantly challenge yourself."

Remember the adage: Too much of a good thing can be a bad thing.

If you flex your brain too hard, and you're stressed and frustrated, you'll end up quitting and burn out a few neurons along the way.

Neuroscientist Aravich says sitting around all day playing computer games or filling out crossword puzzles instead of being with others can muffle the brain, too.

Social interaction plays a critical role in staying mentally fit. You really can't find an online substitute for talking with others, going different places and exposing yourself to other opinions and perspectives.

"The human brain is a social brain," Aravich says.

Lacey suggests dancing for a triple bounce of socializing, exercising and learning new steps.

Volunteer work can be enriching as well, because it puts people in different environments, introduces them to people and makes them use a variety of skills.

Aravich considers working in soup kitchens, or volunteering in schools or nursing homes, the ultimate in multi-tasking:

"It stimulates your heart and your brain."

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Links:

[1] <http://www.sharpbrains.com>