

Can you really save your brain

While we all understand that memory and brain functioning gradually decline over the adult life span, individuals can take many preventive steps to protect their brain functioning and combat the effects of biology. The adult brain has the ability to adapt and change, and neurons in the brain have been shown to regenerate and heal despite aging.

Here are some ways to protect your brain:

1. Adequate, regular sleep is necessary to support full brain functioning. Researchers have found that memory-enhancing activities occur during the deepest stages of sleep, i.e. REM sleep. If you believe

your sleep quality is poor, it is helpful to request a sleep study to ensure that you are receiving adequate REM sleep. Minimize alcohol intake, as alcohol stimulates the reticular activating system in your brain, which interferes with good sleep quality.

2. A recent study found that the hippocampus (the learning center in your brain primarily responsible for memory storage) grew 2% in middle-aged adults who took three, 40-minute walk, per week for a year. The hippocampus typically gets smaller once people enter their mid-50s creating memory loss. Exercise increases the flow of oxygen to the brain, reducing the risks of disorders that lead to memory loss such as stroke and diabetes.

3. Chronic stress has been found to damage the hippocampus. Managing and controlling stress may prevent the harmful effects of stress on the brain.

4. Nutrition is important to the brain. Omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants found in fruits and vegetables, and Vitamins C and E have emerged as nutritional components that protect brain cells.

5. As the saying goes, "use it or lose it." Exercise your brain through puzzles, memory games, playing cards, reading newspapers, taking an adult education class, etc. Challenge your brain cells to work hard, in order to improve cognitive functioning. Your brain is a muscle too, and exercising this muscle will strengthen it.

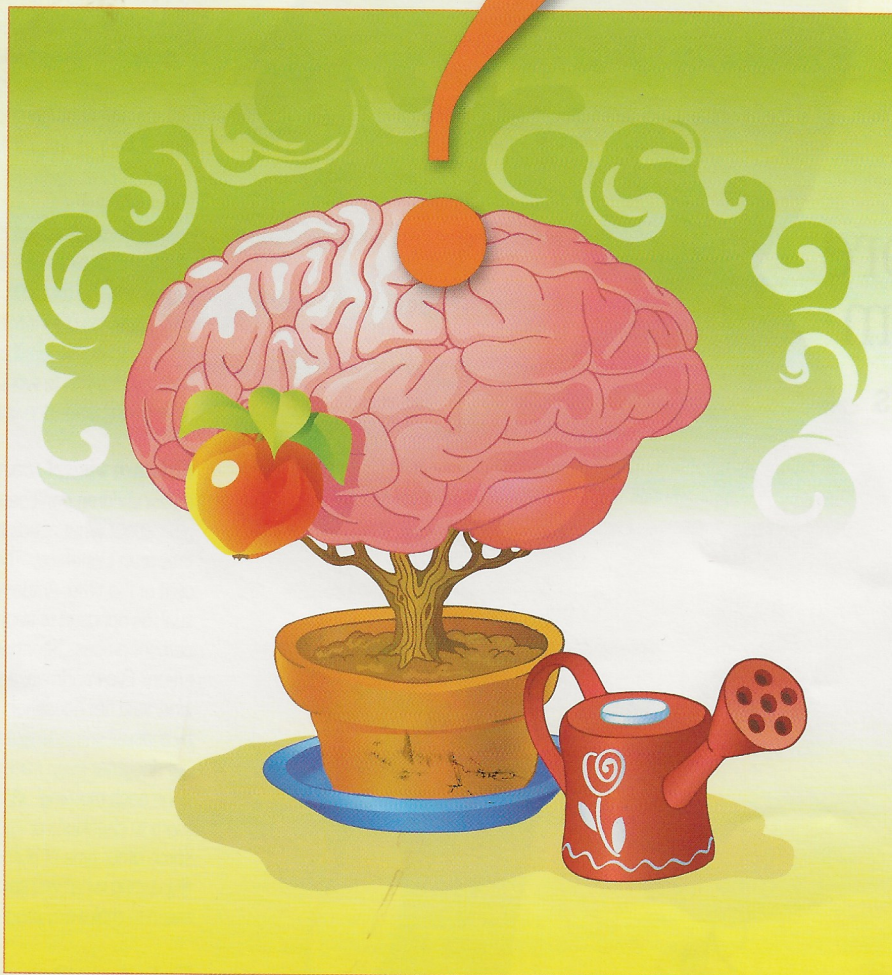
6. Control your blood pressure. Uncontrolled blood pressure can contribute to the second most common form of dementia: vascular dementia.

7. Prevent diabetes. If you already have diabetes,

keep your blood glucose levels managed. Diabetes also contributes to vascular dementia.

For more information on health behaviors that improve brain functioning, check out the following resources:

- *Improving Your Memory for Dummies*, by John Arden
- *Save your Brain, Five Things You Must Do to Keep Your Mind Young and Sharp*, by Paul Nussbaum
- Free "brain games" found on the www.aarp.com website.



Dr. Gail Lisson is a licensed clinical psychologist in the states of North Carolina and Florida and is fellowship-trained in health psychology. Her expertise includes working with patients who experience stress related to their medical problems, promoting better medical compliance and health care behavior, and evaluating patients for surgical risk and readiness. To learn more about Dr. Lisson and her solo, private practice at the Center for Health Solutions, PLLC, please visit her website at www.gaillisson.com.