

# KEEPING SENIORS HEALTHY AT HOME

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## Brain Health



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## Brain Health

Brain health is about keeping the brain working at its best and reducing risks to it as we age. Research suggests the choices you make to keep your body healthy may be good for your brain as well. They also make it easier for the brain to cope with any changes that happen with aging and may reduce your risk for dementia later in life. It's never too early or too late to start being brain healthy.<sup>1 2</sup>



Brain Health and Mental Well-Being: GCBH Recommendations on Feeling Good and Functioning Well  
GlobalCouncilonBrainHealth.org • Contact: GCBH@aarp.org • For more brain health tips see *stayingsharp.org*  
DOI: (<https://doi.org/10.26419/pia.00037.002>)

Global Council on  
**Brain Health**  
A COLLABORATION FROM AARP

A study<sup>3</sup> published in *Stroke* journal lists 13 factors linked to optimal brain health. These include the American Heart Association's Life's Simple 7, plus six other factors:

\* managing blood pressure \* healthy cholesterol levels \* reducing blood sugar \* increasing physical activity \* eating a nutritious diet \* maintaining a healthy weight \* not smoking \* preventing or treating symptoms of depression \* reducing social isolation \* limiting alcohol use \* combating sleep disorders \* keeping the brain active/learning \* treating hearing loss

<sup>1</sup> [www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/brain-health.aspx](http://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/brain-health.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/health/brain\\_health/2018/10/gcbh-mental-well-being-infographic-english.doi.10.26419-2Fpia.00037.002.pdf](http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/health/brain_health/2018/10/gcbh-mental-well-being-infographic-english.doi.10.26419-2Fpia.00037.002.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.ahajournals.org/doi/10.1161/STR.0000000000000148](http://www.ahajournals.org/doi/10.1161/STR.0000000000000148)

## Why is Brain Health Important For Seniors?

Our aging brains can lose some of their functional capabilities over time if they do not receive proper stimulation. A lack of stimulation can cause a gradual decline in our cognitive ability and lead to health and safety issues such as memory loss and falls – the leading cause of serious injury and death among persons over age 65.

However, by participating in brain-healthy activities, seniors can keep their minds sharp and also reduce their risk of cognitive decline and dementia as they age. Most importantly, brain health specialists offer valuable advice on which activities are most helpful to older adults<sup>4</sup>

Studies show that staying mentally stimulated can slow the progress of and reduce the risks of Alzheimer's and dementia. You've got a "use it or lose it" brain. Information rarely accessed and behaviors seldom used cause a decrease in those neural pathways until connections may be completely lost in a process called "synaptic pruning." As a matter of fact, you may be unknowingly contributing to your brain's decline by not challenging it. Activities like reading, jigsaw puzzles, and chess keep your brain active and stimulated.

Common memory challenges for seniors:

- Difficulty learning: Committing new information to memory can take longer
- Multitasking: Slowed processing can make parallel tasks challenging
- Recalling names and numbers uses our 'strategic memory' which begins to decline at age 20
- Remembering appointments: Without cues to recall the information, the brain may put appointments into "storage" and not access them unless something jogs the person's memory

Why brain health is important when it comes to cognitive function has been well researched, but the brain plays an equally important role in other areas of our lives:<sup>5</sup>

- Motor Function: The ability to make and control movements.
- Emotional Function: How we control and respond to emotions.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.brynmawrterrace.org/article/5/10/2019/7-steps-maintain-brain-health-seniors>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.liveinhomecare.com/brain-health-in-the-elderly-why-it-is-so-important/information/>

- Sensory Function: How well we feel and respond to touch, pain, and temperature

### **Benefits that seniors may experience with brain exercise:<sup>6</sup>**

#### 1. Open the mind to new ideas

The brain loves a challenge. Embracing a new language, learning to play an instrument or traveling are a few of the ways you can open those pathways. Going to an unfamiliar area is one of the best ways to boost mental fitness.

#### 2. Mental exercises can be fun

Many of the mental exercises common with seniors come in the form of games, such as crossword puzzles or Sudoku. These games work different quadrants of the brain, which is essential if you want to keep your senses alert. They can also be motivating, challenging and fun.

#### 3. Working out your brain helps you to be more social

Some seniors experience loneliness as they age. Signing up for a class, getting together with friends to play cards or volunteering can help seniors feel less isolated. Being around others may also help them learn about new ideas that keep them thinking. The more social a person is, the more nimble the brain becomes.

### **How can seniors improve their cognitive function?**

A growing body of evidence suggests that seniors who experience the least declines in cognition and memory all share certain habits:<sup>7</sup>

- Engaging in regular physical activity
- Pursuing intellectually stimulating activities
- Staying socially active
- Managing stress
- Eating a healthful diet
- Sleeping well

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aegisliving.com/resource-center/3-benefits-of-mental-exercise-for-seniors/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/319185#Normal-brain-aging>

## Reading and Brain Health



### How can reading benefit seniors?

- Mental stimulation reduces risk of dementia and Alzheimers
- Stress reduction
- Enhanced social skills
- Vocabulary expansion
- Memory improvement
- Improved brain connectivity and function
- Better sleep

### How can a Caregiver support the senior to read?

An important role of a caregiver is to also be a companion to a senior. Meaningful dialogue and conversation are crucial to brain health. Trying to remember details from past conversations will help you find reading material they'll be interested in. Libraries are a great resource not only for books but also free magazines on a wide variety of topics (cars, gardening, knitting, travel, dogs).

- Trips to the library or local book clubs (in-person and virtual)
- If they use devices, make sure the screen is bright and increase font and icon sizes. Declutter their desktop and put direct links to their favourite newspapers, websites and apps on the home screen
- Read to them. It's nice being read to no matter what age you are
- Try audiobooks
- Ask questions about books you see in their home - Have they read the book? Did they enjoy it? Why/why not? What was the story?
- Ask if they read the newspaper that day and what they found interesting
- Did they enjoy reading when they were younger? What were their favourite books or authors?

# Healthy Aging Requires You To Challenge Your Brain

*Don't let age limit you. You have the ability to change your brain at any age.*

The evidence today regarding the benefits of what most people consider "brain games" is weak to non-existent.

## TIP 1

Find new ways to stimulate your brain and **challenge the way you think**.



## TIP 2

Choose activities that involve both **mental engagement and physical exercise**.



## TIP 3

Seek out mentally-stimulating activities that incorporate **social engagement and greater purpose**, such as volunteering or mentoring.



The GCBH defines cognitively-stimulating activities as mentally-engaging activities or exercises that challenge a person's ability to think.

## Visual Art Therapy <sup>8</sup>

Art is a powerful tool that allows us to express creativity, thoughts, and feelings. Some even say that “art is food for the soul,” but can it also be “food for the mind”? Art therapy is a large umbrella term that incorporates many types of artistic expression and creation, including the use of drawing, painting, sculpting, needlework, crafting, music, dance, and more. It may improve cognitive function and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Art therapy activates the brain through planning, making decisions (what materials and techniques to use), thinking outside the box, communication (talking about the artwork), relationship building through interactions with classmates, reflection on past experiences, reconciling certain emotions and conflicts, and coming to resolutions. All of these functions contribute to cognitive stimulation which could clearly benefit the brain health of seniors.

### [Beyond Words: Art Therapy with Older Adults](#) [Benefits of Art Therapy for Seniors with Memory Challenges](#)

Benefits from art therapy:<sup>9</sup>

- Opportunities for self-expression
- The ability to build a positive perspective on life
- A sense of purpose
- Support towards more independence and self-sufficiency
- The ability to work through difficult experiences and past traumas
- Communicate emotions verbally and nonverbally
- Learn constructive techniques to self-manage
- Develop strategies for hand-eye coordination and motor skills
- Develop healthy coping strategies and decrease stress and anxiety
- Increase attention span

Art Therapy Activities for Seniors:<sup>10</sup>

- Needlework
- Painting
- Making collages
- Drawing
- [Art for Alzheimers Care](#) (instructional video series with activity ideas)

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<sup>8</sup> [www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/blog/detail/blog/2021/01/06/let-s-get-visual-the-art-of-improving-cognitive-ability-and-mental-wellbeing](http://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/blog/detail/blog/2021/01/06/let-s-get-visual-the-art-of-improving-cognitive-ability-and-mental-wellbeing)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.icarehomehealth.ca/how-art-therapy-can-help-people-of-all-ages/>

<sup>10</sup> [blog.ioaging.org/home-care/art-therapy-for-seniors-how-creative-expression-can-have-benefits-that-you-never-imagined/](http://blog.ioaging.org/home-care/art-therapy-for-seniors-how-creative-expression-can-have-benefits-that-you-never-imagined/)

## Music Therapy for Seniors<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to dementia, music therapy is one of the most successful interventions. In Canada an estimated 65% of music therapists work with the cognitively impaired elderly. In a review of special care units staff rated the effectiveness of different interventions and music therapy was viewed as the best interventions for this population.

Music can serve a means of communication for those where the function of language has become very challenging or lost. Music is a pre-verbal and sometimes non-verbal brain function, predating the ability for language. Furthermore, music is processed by many different parts of the brain rather than just one center, as in language. The elements of music such as rhythm, pitch, and melody are all processed differently. Emotions are also tied in with music, thus activating the limbic system. Studies show that music is received and processed at the brainstem level, which proves just how basic and primeval sound is to humans. In a small study by Norberg et al 1986, music was the only stimulus that could elicit a response from those in the final stages of Alzheimer disease. There is research that supports the fact that Alzheimer's patients are able to retain musical perception - participants remember all the words to a song when otherwise they can barely speak or put a coherent sentence together.

[A Mind Roused by Music](#) - Clip from documentary, *Alive Inside*

Benefits of music for the brain (especially in dementia patients):

- Changes in facial expression and tension
- Increased eye contact
- Vocal activity
- Encourages movement
- Sense of belonging
- Increased quality of life
- Stimulates memory
- Relaxation
- Reduces symptoms of depression

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<sup>11</sup> [https://musicheals.ca/client\\_populations/music-therapy-in-alzheimer-and-dementia-care/](https://musicheals.ca/client_populations/music-therapy-in-alzheimer-and-dementia-care/)

# MUSIC ON OUR MINDS



Enjoying and engaging in music promotes  
**healthy aging, mental well-being,** and **social connection**



Explore the joys and benefits of music with these practical tips:



### **Incorporate music in your life.**

Music can improve well-being, especially when shared with loved ones.



### **Listen to music to encourage yourself to exercise.**

Music can provide a mental boost and help motivate you to move your body.



### **Dance, sing or move to music.**

These activities not only provide physical exercise but can also relieve stress and create social connections.



### **Listen to familiar music that comforts you and evokes positive memories.**

Also try listening to *new* music to stimulate your brain with unfamiliar melodies.



### **Don't delay getting your hearing checked if you notice hearing difficulties.**

Correcting hearing loss as soon as possible is important for brain health (as well as continuing to enjoy music!)



### **Make music yourself!**

Music making can include both singing and playing an instrument (singing may be the simplest way to get started).



### **Consider joining or forming a music-making group, such as a community choir.**

Making music with friends and family creates a sense of belonging that promotes mental well-being.

Music on Our Minds: The Rich Potential of Music to Promote Brain Health and Mental Well-Being [GlobalCouncilonBrainHealth.org](http://GlobalCouncilonBrainHealth.org) • Contact: [GCBH@aarp.org](mailto:GCBH@aarp.org)  
For more brain health tips see [StayingSharp.org](http://StayingSharp.org)  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26419/pia.00103.002>

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[Music On Our Minds \(english\)](#)

[Spanish Version](#)

[French Version](#)

## Activities For Brain Health

Games:

- Word games and puzzles (Scrabble, crosswords)
- Computer brain games
- Jigsaw puzzles
- Sudoku
- Trivia games (Trivial Pursuit)
- Chess
- Backgammon
- Bingo
- Card Games (Bridge, Gin, Poker)
- Simple math games (Yhatzee, Dominoes, Monopoly)
- Video games ([Nintendo Wii for Seniors](#))

Challenge your senior to:

- Read a short story and retell it to you
- Write or record their life story
- Research on Ancestry
- Watch films
- Brush up on a language by watching foreign films
- Listen to podcasts on their favourite topics and then ask what they learned
- Join a Zoom book club
- Beading, quilting, sewing, knitting, making jewelry, painting
- Learn a musical instrument

For more active seniors:

- Dance classes
- Karaoke
- Learn a language (find local language exchange meetup groups)
- Photography
- Tai Chi, Yoga
- Bocce Ball, Lawn bowling

Additional Resources:

[Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health](#)

[Free Online Classes for Seniors](#)