

# Train the brain

**Mohana Ravindranath** lists some small things neurologists wish you'd do to keep cognitive decline at bay

**S**mall tweaks to your daily routine can go a long way toward protecting your body's control centre and preventing cognitive decline down the road. In fact, scientists believe that as many as 45 per cent of dementia cases could be delayed or prevented with help from some simple, sometimes surprising, changes in behaviour.

It's never too early or too late to start, but time is of the essence when it comes to building your brain's defences, especially since it's generally impossible to reverse brain damage once it's happened, said Dr Eva Feldman, a professor of neurology at the University of Michigan's Neuroscience Institute in the US.

We asked eight neurologists and neuroscientists to share their best tips.

## Wear a helmet

Physically protecting your head is the single most important step you can take to safeguard your brain, experts said. Recurrent head trauma from traumatic brain injuries and concussions can lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which can worsen cognition overall and, in some cases, cause dementia.

Wearing a helmet during activities like biking and skiing can significantly reduce the risk of injury, Dr Feldman said. Motorcyclists should also always wear helmets, even if state laws don't require them.

## Put in earplugs

Older people with hearing loss have a greater risk for developing dementia. Scientists think it may be because the part of the brain that processes hearing is close to the part responsible for memory, or it could be a result of atrophy; people who have hearing loss tend to withdraw from social activities that could keep their minds engaged. To protect your brain's ability to process sensory signals, use earplugs or noise-protection earmuffs when you're around loud sounds, said Dr Elizabeth Bevins, a neurologist at UC San Diego Health, US. In addition, people over 50 and anyone frequently exposed to loud noises should get a hearing test every one to three years, she said.

## Get eyes checked

It's not only about maintaining your hearing; scientists also believe vision loss is linked to cognitive decline. Scheduling regular eye exams and wearing glasses, or getting corrective surgery when needed, could help minimise that risk. "We have this saying in brain health" that is especially true for retirees, Dr Shlee Song, a neurologist at Cedars-Sinai in Los



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Angeles, US, said, "Use it or lose it." The brain is better at making connections and processing input for the senses that it actively uses, she said.

## Take a walk

Neurologists know that exercise benefits the brain by increasing blood flow and ferrying oxygen to it. Even a small dose of daily exercise — like walking half a mile — can bring those rewards, said Dr Cyrus Raji, an associate professor of radiology at Washington University School of Medicine, US.

## Manage your cholesterol

The low-density lipoprotein (or "bad") cholesterol that can come from consuming red meats, full-fat dairy and sugary drinks can harden your arteries, restricting blood flow to the brain and increasing your risk for stroke and cognitive decline, said Dr Fernando Testai, a professor of vascular neurology at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in the US.

Eating legumes, whole grains and fruits and vegetables can help you manage cholesterol levels. So can maintaining a healthy weight, regular aerobic exercise and medications like statins, Dr Testai said. Check your levels every few years, or more frequently if you have diabetes or an elevated risk of stroke or heart disease, he said.

## Maintain oral hygiene

Oral infections can spread to the sinuses, which can then trigger a clot or drainage problems in the brain, Dr Song said. Research has also found a link between gum disease and dementia. Regularly flossing and brushing your teeth and visiting the dentist at least every year (or twice a year) can keep your teeth and gums healthy, she said, which can help avert an infection that could lead to future issues.

## Have a social life

Maintaining an active social life keeps the negative health effects of isolation —

such as depression, or even early mortality — at bay, said Dr Jessica Choi, a neurologist at Cedars-Sinai, US. Dr Choi said that her patients who have a strong social support system are typically in better overall health than the ones who don't.

## Sleep well

Finding ways to improve your time spent sleeping, and the quality of that sleep, can go a long way toward helping you stay sharp and fend off dementia, Dr Feldman said. If you work night shifts and sleep during the day, consider blackout shades to help regulate your body's circadian rhythm, she said. If anxiety and depression are keeping you up, try meditating before bed, she added. If you aren't sure where your sleep problems lie, keep a sleep diary to help identify potential issues. "A rested mind" is crucial for brain health, "as sleep helps consolidate memories and clear out cellular debris from the brain", Dr Feldman said.

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