

Understanding brain health



What is brain health?

Brain health is a broad term that encompasses more than just the absence of disease. It also includes overall healthy cognitive functioning, resilience, mental health, and a state of well-being where individuals feel able to fulfil their potential. The brain is a complex organ - it is the centre of the body's nervous system and the locus of your cognition. It is made up of over 100 billion neurons, and is responsible for everything that you do, feel, and perceive.

Many different factors can influence your brain health. While some factors are not modifiable (such as genetics), there are lots of ways to improve and maintain brain health.



Why is brain health important?

Just like other parts of the body, your brain needs proper care to stay in top shape. As you age, there are some changes to thinking, emotions, and cognition which are completely normal. However, a healthy lifestyle is essential to prevent these changes from reaching a clinical level. A minor increase in forgetfulness is a normal part of ageing, but diseases such as dementia and stroke are not.

In fact, research suggests that 40% of Alzheimer's disease cases, and 80% of strokes, could be prevented. Implementing healthy brain habits can make a real difference in your risk of developing serious neurological diseases later in life.

Strategies to improve brain health

Brain health is deeply influenced by your overall health and wellbeing. A healthy body protects a healthy mind, so a lot of brain health advice mirrors general guidelines for a healthy lifestyle.

Exercise. Studies show that regular exercise improves emotional wellbeing, reduces risk of stroke, and protects against cognitive decline as you age. This can also help maintain a healthy blood pressure, which is also key to brain health.

Nutrition. Eating a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats provides the nutrients your brain needs to function well. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish and nuts, are especially good for brain health. Keep alcohol, sugar, and processed foods to a minimum.

Sleep. During sleep, your brain processes information, consolidates memories, and repairs itself. Getting enough sleep is essential for good mental and physical health.

Stress & anxiety. Short-term stress is normal, but long-term or chronic stress can be incredibly damaging to your brain and heart health. Relaxation and stress management techniques are important to reduce stress levels.

Social connection. Regularly spending time with friends, family, and your local community is protective against Alzheimer's disease, and improves mental health.

Quit smoking. Smoking increases your risk of brain diseases such as stroke and certain types of dementia.

Education & challenging your brain. Education reduces the risk of cognitive decline and dementia. It's also important to continue learning and challenging your brain throughout your life, through new skills and experiences.

Conclusion

These are just a few strategies to keep in mind, but remember that brain health will be different for everyone. It's not always possible to control every risk factor. A person in their 30s, who is living with migraine, will have very different considerations to someone in their 70s, who is experiencing mild cognitive impairment. Maintaining brain health is a lifelong journey, and small lifestyle changes can have meaningful positive outcomes.

Learn more at <https://brainfoundation.org.au/healthy-brain/>