

# Use It or Lose It

April 2011 Monthly Bulletin



## Head Starts

### The amazing brain

Until recently, experts believed that by the end of childhood, most of the brain's "hard wiring" had already taken place. But recent research shows that the brain never stops forming new neural connections – or pathways of learning. **More...**



## Worklife Balance

### Smart goals lead to achievement

One of the most important parts of a fitness program is having realistic goals. The SMART system of goal setting can help you set exercise goals that are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ction-oriented, **R**ealistic and **T**imed. **More...**



## Health View

### Exercise: It goes right to your head

We all know that exercise helps keep our bodies in good condition. Now research shows that exercise can also help keep our brains fit.. **More...**



## Memory Lapse - or More?

### Where are my keys?

Have you ever lost your keys, forgotten someone's name - or totally blanked on a word you were sure you knew? Most of us have! So should you be concerned about Alzheimer's Disease? **More...**



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### Head Starts

# Your amazing brain

Until recently experts believed that by the end of childhood, most of the brain's "hard wiring" had already taken place. But recent research shows that the brain never stops forming new neural connections – or pathways of learning.

Thanks to the brain's "neuroplasticity," or ability to grow and change, we can learn new things at every stage of life.

### What is "neuroplasticity?"

"Neuroplasticity" means that your brain keeps growing as you continue to learn.<sup>1</sup> Here's how:

- New connections are built between nerve cells when your brain is stimulated.
- This enables brain cells to communicate with each other along the new pathways.
- As a result, your brain can continue to accept and retrieve information throughout your life.

### "Use it or lose it" takes on new importance

Simply put, your brain can learn new things at any age. But it's up to you to keep your brain stimulated so you can continue to build and maintain brain power.

Mental activity is critical. It keeps your attention, creativity, memory and other mental powers strong and sharp.

### Tips for boosting brainpower

Here are some suggestions for using neuroplasticity – your brain's "grow power" – to maintain brain fitness:

- Read anything and everything.
- Listen to audio books.
- Keep up to date with news.
- Take up a musical instrument.
- Volunteer to do something totally new.
- Learn a new language.
- Take an adult education course in something you've never studied.
- Play Scrabble®, bridge and other mentally challenging games.
- Do crossword puzzles and other brainteasers.
- Start a new hobby.
- Interact with other people to broaden your horizons.

Each of these activities presents change and challenge. These are two keys to keeping your mind alert and agile.

<sup>1</sup>Introduction to Neuroplasticity. July 7, 2010. Available at <http://memoryzine.com/2010/07/02/introduction-to-neuroplasticity>. Accessed March 4, 2011

### Getting Help

For help with personal or workplace issues, contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). These confidential services are available to employees and their eligible household members 24/7.



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*Worklife Balance*

## Smart goals help you use it or lose it

One of the most important parts of a fitness program is having realistic goals. The SMART system of goal setting can help you set exercise goals that are **Specific**, **Measurable**, **Action-oriented**, **Realistic** and **Timed**.

- **Specific.** What do you want to accomplish? Weight reduction, better muscle tone, stress reduction, improved sports performance? These are examples of specific goals.
- **Measurable.** Unless a goal is measurable, there's no way of knowing if it has been reached. Fortunately, most specific exercise goals are easily measured using a scale, tape measure or endurance chart.
- **Action-oriented.** Write an action plan for long-term and short-term goals. If your long-term goal is to lose 60 pounds, then a reasonable short-term goal might be to lose two pounds a week. Achieving short-term goals gives you a needed sense of accomplishment from day to day and week to week.

- **Realistic.** Hold your goals up to the reality test. If you hate pounding the pavement, don't set yourself up for failure with an intense jogging routine. Focus on what you do enjoy.
- **Timed.** For each goal, set a target date that will motivate you and help keep you on track. Challenge yourself, but be realistic.

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**Health View**

## Exercise: It goes right to your head!

We all know that exercise helps keep our bodies in good condition. Now research shows that exercise can also help keep our brains fit.

A study at the University of Illinois<sup>1</sup> shows that we can keep entire regions of our brains healthy by staying active. These parts of the brain directly affect our abilities to learn and remember.

### **Exercise and brain size**

In the University of Illinois study, adults who exercised regularly actually increased the size of their brains in the area of the hippocampus. The hippocampus helps us store and use our memory and reasoning.

The hippocampus can shrink as adults become less active. This helps explain why older adults who don't or can't exercise sometimes lose important memory and judgment skills. And that can impact their independence. So keeping active can help build brainpower and preserve an independent lifestyle.

### **Ready, set, go!**

Do you enjoy biking, running, swimming or brisk walking? These are all aerobic exercises. They raise your heartbeat and breathing rate, and pump more oxygen through your bloodstream. They help maintain mental fitness.

If you thought exercise was only for weight loss and muscle building, think again – and start moving!

<sup>1</sup>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2009, March 3). Physical Fitness Improves Spatial Memory, Increases Size of Brain.

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### *Memory Lapse - or More?*



## “Where are my keys?”

Sometimes, I walk into my home and throw my car keys somewhere instead of putting them in their normal place. There are many reasons why I do this. I might be tired, in a rush or just thinking about the next thing I need to do. Soon enough, I need the keys and can't find them. Most of us have had a similar experience. Do we need to worry about having Alzheimer's disease? Probably not.

An Alzheimer's sufferer not only misplaces keys, but may not remember the purpose for the keys. Or the keys may be placed in the freezer rather than on the counter.

### **Alzheimer's disease:**

- Slowly destroys a person's memory
- Makes it difficult to learn new things
- Reduces ability to reason
- Makes it hard to make a decision
- Lessens ability to communicate

You may be worried about your own or a loved one's memory. If so, consider talking with a medical doctor. You might also visit the [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) site to learn more about Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

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All EAP calls are confidential, except as required by law (i.e., when a person's emotional condition is a threat to himself/herself or others, or there is suspected abuse of a minor child, and in some areas, spousal or elder abuse).

Information is believed to be accurate as of the production date; however, it is subject to change.

