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Mind Matters

Did you ever forget where you put something? Do you ever have trouble remembering the right word when you're trying to explain something? Did those events ever make you worry about your mind and what's going on in it? Based on the questions I get, many of you are concerned and wonder what you can do about making sure your mind stays sharp.

The answer may be found at the other end of your body: your feet. Let's take a look at a couple of recently published studies.

Study One: Cognitive Impairment in Over-75s

Researchers examined the activity levels of men and women beginning at an average age of almost 75 (1). They were free of physical and mental impairments at the beginning of the long-term study to measure cognitive impairment, the term used to describe the loss of short-term memory and the ability to learn. Researchers tested their cognitive ability several times over five years. They also tested their activity levels using a technique called doubly labeled water in addition to standard activity questionnaires.

The researchers found a dose-response relationship between physical activity and cognitive decline: the subjects who moved more had less decline in memory and learning. The researchers did not test for the intensity of exercise that was most beneficial, but there was no doubt—the more time spent moving in a day, the less decline.

What's important is the age of the subjects. They went from an average of 75 to 80 years during the study. We don't know how active they were before the study but we know that if these older adults exercised and moved more, their minds stayed sharper.

Study Two: Cognitive Impairment in Women Over 65

Researchers contacted women 65 and older who were subjects in the Women's Antioxidant Cardiovascular Study (2). All subjects had at least three risk factors for coronary artery disease such as diabetes, hypertension, etc. The researchers used a standard activities questionnaire to assess the physical activity of the subjects at the beginning of the study and every two years thereafter; they tested cognitive ability using five different tests. All testing was done over the phone. While these techniques are not quite as good as the prior study, having 10 times more subjects adds power to the outcomes.

Dividing the subjects into five groups by activity level, those in the group with the highest activity levels had the least decline in cognitive ability for each of four testing sessions. Those with the least activity had the most serious decline. In this case, researchers were able to determine that the more strenuous the activity, the better the results.

Now before you talk Grandma into running a marathon, the level of activity associated with the least decline was brisk walking, about four miles per hour, for 30 minutes every day. Doesn't seem all that bad, does it? The researchers stated that those women who achieved that level of activity were cognitively younger by five to seven years.

The Bottom Line

I think these two studies illustrate the benefit of exercise on mind matters. The real lesson is that you don't have to break your body to keep your mind sharp—you just have to move every day in some manner, and brisk walking will do it. And think how much better it would be if you *didn't* wait until you were 65 to start!

There are other factors that can affect cognition for sure; there's also a genetic component to memory. But if you want to make sure that you keep your mind sharp as long as you can, then you have to move the body that carries it around—every day. It all comes down to the same question:

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. Arch Intern Med. 2011;171(14):1251-57.
2. Arch Intern Med. 2011;171(14):1244-50.

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