

## Five ways to sharpen your brain

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Improving brain health to stop memory loss is a key concern of older adults, but many don't know the best way to strengthen their mind. Health Alliance Plan (HAP) has been educating its members at Sharpen Your Brain workshops offering simple exercises to stimulate brain growth.

The workshops are run by a team from the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University (WSU), Donna MacDonald, the institute's director of outreach and educational programs, and Cheryl Deep, who directs media relations and communications. They developed their popular brain training workshops, also known as Brain Neurobics in conjunction with WSU and other cognitive neuroscience researchers. Now they are sharing some of their top tricks to stimulate the brain.

1. Shake up your world. Strain your brain to re-train your brain. Just like building muscle, you need to give the brain a little workout to build and strengthen memory. Force your brain to pay attention with daily surprises like wearing your watch on the other wrist, or eating dinner with your non-dominant hand. These small stimulations help to build new connections in the brain's memory center. Move a wastebasket to the opposite corner of a room. Write your name backwards, so it looks correct in a mirror. The brain loves novelty. Puzzles and brain games help, too. Try games you aren't particularly good at for an added challenge.
2. Sleep like a baby. We think about 70,000 thoughts every day. Sustained, deep sleep allows us to sort and organize all those thoughts and experiences. Without quality sleep, thoughts collect in a chaotic pile, like returned library books. If they aren't re-stocked on the right shelves, we'll never find them again. Aim for seven to eight hours of sleep each night with four hours of uninterrupted, deep sleep.
3. Move that body. The brain may be small in size but uses 20 percent of all the oxygen we breathe. Brain cells need oxygen to survive and thrive. Keep your arteries flowing freely by eating healthy, lower in fat and higher in fruits and vegetables, and be sure to get 30 minutes of aerobic exercise most days of the week. Aerobic means you're breathing more heavily and your heart is beating a little faster. Your doctor can tell you what's safe, but most folks are fine with a brisk walk. What's good for the body is great for the brain.
4. You've got to have friends. Socializing is one of the most stimulating activities our brain performs. Think of the many layers of study and understanding needed in even a simple get-together. Names, faces, body language, tone of voice, listening, talking, movement – this challenges the brain and encourages it to grow. Living socially also boosts our mood to protect us from depression which can hamper memory and brain function.
5. Floss. That's right. Flossing once a day and brushing twice a day protects against gum swelling that can raise the risk of dementia. A research study of over 1,000 folks in their 70s showed that gum swelling was the cause most strongly related with mental decline. Poor mouth health can cause heart disease, too, so floss like your life (and your brain) depends on it.

For more healthy aging resources from HAP visit [hap.org](http://hap.org). For more brain exercises from the experts at Wayne State University, go to <http://keepyourbrainalive.com/exercise.html>

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