

## 5 Small But Powerful Tips to Protect Your Brain

**W**e're all familiar with exercise and diet to keep our bodies healthy. After a few weeks, we can see improvements. However, the idea of keeping our brains healthy often doesn't receive the same attention and the results are harder to see. But keeping our brains in shape is critical for our quality of life as we age. We'll share some tips from Dr. Marc Milstein, a neuroscience researcher, about how to keep your brain sharp.

### What we'll be covering:

1. Are our brains shrinking?
2. 5 simple lifestyle tips for a healthy brain
3. Why a little goes a long way

### First, Are Our Brains Shrinking?

Starting at age 40, our brains shrink about 5% every 10 years.<sup>1</sup> This brain-shrinking process can impact not just our ability to remember important information, but also our ability to learn, reason, communicate, and even maintain our balance and mobility.

Now, you might be thinking, "I can't control my brain's health. My genes will determine my brain health." However, Dr. Milstein says, "More and more research points us to a

compelling conclusion and powerful message: that we—not our genes—can have control over our cognitive health today and the destiny of our brains." He points to a study that found that those who followed recommendations for simple lifestyle modifications reduced their risk of developing Alzheimer's by nearly 60 percent.<sup>2</sup>



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Source: The Age-Proof Brain, Marc Milstein

## Second, 5 Simple Lifestyle Tips for a Healthy Brain

Let's look at five easy-to-do lifestyle tips that can keep our brains in tip-top shape and avoid shrinking. Let's start with food.



**1 Food:** With so much nutrition and diet advice out there, it can get pretty overwhelming. Plus, everyone's unique with different needs. But you know what's a game-changer? Checking out food ingredients. If you spot partially hydrogenated oil on the list, that's your cue to skip it. That stuff's like factory-made fat and our brains just aren't fans. Instead, stick to foods that provide healthy fats—think avocados and nuts—and leave the lab-made fats on the shelf. It's a small step, but it can make a huge difference in our brain health.



**2 Sleep:** Getting enough sleep is essential for brain health. When we sleep, brain activity slows down significantly, and our brains take out the "brain trash": waste products such as beta-amyloid protein and toxins such as heavy metals. Both contribute to premature brain aging.

A study found a simple yet effective way to improve sleep is to avoid clock-watching. When people worry about not getting enough sleep, they often start calculating how long it will take to fall back asleep and when they need to wake up. This thinking isn't helpful for falling asleep. The more stressed you are, the harder it is to drift off.

If you find yourself staring at the clock or calculating sleep hours in the middle of the night, keep your clock or device out of sight (or reach). While using an alarm is fine, the clock itself not only causes stress and worry, which are enemies of sleep, but the light from devices confuses the brain into thinking it's daytime.<sup>3</sup>



**3 Stress:** It can be beneficial for our brain in moderation. Dr. Milstein says a moment of stress for something you want to get done or a challenge you want to tackle is good. That actually keeps your brain cells healthy."

However, too much stress is harmful. Taking real breaks is crucial. A real break means disconnecting from work and truly relaxing, not multitasking. It's not going on a walk while making a work phone call, answering an email, or checking the news.

Activities such as enjoying nature can also reduce stress levels. Studies have shown that just being in a local park, a flower bed, a garden, or just looking at a houseplant for a minute or two can bring stress levels down.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Milstein says, "It can sound silly and a bit ridiculous, but when the brain sees nature, it just calms down and it relaxes."



#### 4 Learning New Things:

One of the best ways to keep our brains healthy is by learning new things. You don't need to spend money or join a special program. It could be anything—listening to a podcast, trying a new sport, learning a musical instrument, or picking up a foreign language. The key is that it's new to you because the novelty is what makes it effective.

Learning plays a significant part in disposing of brain trash via a “power wash” that uses one of your body's most effective brain cleansers: norepinephrine. When you learn something new, your brain receives bursts of norepinephrine, a hormone and neurotransmitter that regulates heart rate, attention, memory, and cognition.<sup>2</sup> The norepinephrine breaks up the waste and trash in your brain so it can be excreted when you sleep. This keeps your brain young, healthy, and able to make new connections.



#### 5 Exercise:

Getting your heart rate up for just six minutes with activities such as jumping jacks, brisk walking, or using an exercise bike offers great brain health benefits. It doesn't need to be a marathon or triathlon. The idea is to add a bit more intensity to a few minutes of your day to boost your heart rate. This heart-brain connection is crucial. Think of it as a quick burst of activity, which is good news for those of us who aren't keen on running marathons!



### Third, Why a Little Goes a Long Way

If we try to do everything at once, we often end up doing nothing. Start small and make one new habit stick. For example, commit to five minutes of brisk walking while listening to your favorite music. Once that's a habit, add another activity.

Combine activities for more benefits. Walk with a friend, discuss a new show or book, and enjoy nature. Studies show combining activities is more effective. Aim to incorporate about five healthy habits into your life for the best results.

### "I'm in My 60s, It Must Be Too Late"

Nope, it's definitely not too late! While we can't speak for every individual case, especially if there are underlying conditions, most people can still benefit from adopting healthy lifestyle habits.

A famous study from Finland looked at folks in their 60s, 70s, and even late 70s. They found that people who followed tips like what we've discussed improved their brain function significantly. Their brains worked faster, their ability to process information increased by 150%, and their executive functioning and memory test scores went up, too.<sup>5</sup>

So, let's ditch the idea that it's too late to make a difference. Even at 65, 70, or 75, adopting healthy habits can lower risks and boost brain function. It's never too late to start.

### Next Steps

1. Choose three of the tips above and begin implementing them this week
2. Get more insights from Dr. Milstein about how to improve brain health at [hartfordfunds.com/braintips](https://hartfordfunds.com/braintips)

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> Milstein, Marc. (2022). *The Age-Proof Brain*. BenBella Books, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Klodian Dhana et al., "Healthy Lifestyle and the Risk of Alzheimer Dementia," *Neurology* 95, no. 4 (2020): e374–e383, <https://doi.org/10.1212/WNL.0000000000009816>

<sup>3</sup> Losing sleep over losing sleep: how watching the clock impacts insomnia, use of sleep aids, *Science Daily*, 5/16/23

<sup>4</sup> A 20-minute nature break relieves stress, *Harvard Health Publishing*, 7/1/19

<sup>5</sup> The Finger Study: Lifestyle Can Prevent Cognitive Decline, *Fingers Brain Health Institute*, 2023

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author, who is not affiliated with Hartford Funds. If you are concerned about your brain health or cognitive function, it's a good idea to speak with your doctor or a healthcare professional, who can evaluate your cognitive function and provide recommendations for management and treatment, if necessary

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