

Tips for Aging Well

The number of people aged 65 years and older will jump significantly in the upcoming years, to represent over 20% of the population by 2025. If we listen to the stereotypes and prejudice regarding the elderly, we may believe that our society is moving towards a catastrophic outcome. Aging is too often associated with lower activity levels, social isolation, a loss of enjoyment and most of all, the progressive decline in intellectual function. However...



Current studies on aging suggest that cognitive aging is not a homogeneous phenomenon and that some seniors keep an active lifestyle and enjoy impressive cognitive abilities despite their advanced age. Cognitive aging doesn't have an identical effect on cognitive abilities from one person to another, nor does it happen at the same age for everyone. Many factors are behind these differences in how we age. Genetics may influence the way we age, but it is now known that certain lifestyle choices will also play a significant role – including our education, physical activity level, intellectual stimulation and even our social network.

As we get older, it's true that information may be processed at a slower rate. We might have some difficulty remembering and processing recent information, or having trouble deciding which information is relevant. Doing two things at once, such as looking for a radio station while driving, may become more difficult. But the brain is an amazing organ. It might perform less, but it does learn to compensate for its weaknesses. Thanks to recent developments in brain imagery, we have discovered that seniors use their brain differently than younger adults in order to reach the same performance. Scientists believe that these differences stem from various processes developed by the brain to compensate neuron losses normally associated with aging. Certain strategies may contribute to maintaining one's cognitive health:

- 1. Intellectual stimulation.** One must stay active from an intellectual standpoint, but also look for various challenges: stepping out of one's comfort zone by learning a new language, for example. This brings many benefits for the intellectual function. Various studies have suggested that intellectual stimulation may promote cognitive abilities as well as slow down cognitive decline.
- 2. Physical activity.** A sedentary person who starts doing aerobic activity each week may improve their performance in cognitive tests. For brain improvement to be reached, the physical condition must be improved as well. The physical activities chosen must be vigorous and carried out repeatedly each week. When comparing an aerobic training program (speed walking) with a program that includes only strength and flexibility for sedentary, healthy seniors, results show that participants in the aerobic program have significant improvements in cardio-respiratory functions as well as better cognitive

performance. This cognitive improvement may be caused by many factors, including an increased vascularization of cerebral tissue.

In addition to improving respiratory health, regular physical activity contributes to lowering the risk of developing aging-related diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, osteoporosis and certain types of cancer. Physical activity thus contributes to the development of certain detrimental phenomena related to aging, and creates a feeling of physical well-being in seniors, as well as a sense of psychological satisfaction.

- 3. A healthy diet.** No anti-aging diet can slow down one's intellectual decline. However, an unhealthy diet may cause certain nutrient deficits, which may provoke in turn certain cognitive difficulties. Similarly, a healthy diet (rich in green vegetables, low in red meat and in polyunsaturated fats) has been associated to healthier cognitive aging. The important thing is to have a complete and balanced diet.

- 4. An active social life.** Social isolation should be avoided. Cognitive decline may cause a person to distance themselves from others, by fear of forgetting other people's names. It has been shown, however, that having a rich social life is associated with a healthier life, both on the physical and cognitive standpoints. If a person wishes to take as many initiatives as possible to maintain his cognitive health, the fourth strategy would be to maintain good relationships with friends and acquaintances. Moreover, regular contact with family and friends also brings a certain intellectual stimulation, and often, physical activity opportunities as well.

In a nutshell, successful aging can be attributed to

- finding strategies to continue doing our favorites activities, if even if it means doing them in a different manner,
- blooming rather than withering
- remaining happy at this stage of our life
- finding our personal balance between gains and losses at this particular time of our life.



References (in French):

- Les troubles de la mémoire et le vieillissement / BELLEVILLE, Sylvie. Psychologie Québec, 2004 (Mai), p. 22-24.
- Le vieillissement cognitif chez les personnes âgées en bonne santé : une remise en question des notions défaitistes classiques / BHERER, Louis. Cardinale, 2005, vol. 17 (7 (sept.)), p. 8-12.
- Comment réussir son vieillissement : des secrets au coeur du cerveau / GARNIER, Emmanuèle. Le Médecin du Québec, 2008, vol. 43 (12), p. 23-27.
- L'impact de la condition physique sur le vieillissement cognitif / RENAUD, Mélanie ; BHERER, Louis. Psychologie & neuropsychiatrie du vieillissement, 2005, vol. 3 (3 (sept)), p. 199-206.