

WELLBEING

MASTER YOUR MIND

PHOTO: GETTY

IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT YOUR PHYSICAL FITNESS, SAYS **VICKI-MARIE COSSAR**, YOU SHOULD BE MAKING SURE YOUR GREY MATTER IS IN SHAPE, TOO...

IT'S NOT just your body you need to train to keep in peak physical condition. Your brain is a muscle, too, and it needs constant stimulation to keep you living your best life. The theory 'use it or lose it' isn't far from the truth when it comes to maintaining optimal brain health - and while it's thought we should be doing specific brain training, Dr Amir-Homayoun Javadi, a senior lecturer in cognitive neuroscience at the School of Psychology (University of Kent), says it's far simpler than that.

While Alzheimer's and Parkinson's are typically referred to as neurodegenerative disorders, things like strokes and heart attacks can also be attributed to cognitive decline - so it's worth taking note. First, let's understand how the brain works. 'The brain consists of many entangled neurons that communicate with each other via electrical pulses,' explains Dr Javadi. 'All

and travelling to a location, plus language, memory, planning, reading body language, etc. This activates many different parts of the brain which essentially leads to better brain health.'

It's the same for cognitive engagement. 'This could be solving crossword puzzles, or sudoku, reading books, learning a new task like how to play the piano, or how to speak Spanish. These tasks specifically target different parts of the brain and by doing so they activate many neurons, leading to better brain health.'

Physical activity works slightly differently. 'During exercise, your brain becomes super-active because body coordination is very demanding cognitively,' he says. 'Plus, it increases blood circulation, balances hormonal levels in the brain and promotes neurogenesis. Also, if you have exercises that involve teams, it links to the social interaction aspect and so acts through multiple pathways, thus enhancing the effects.'

Lockdown has much to answer for and while we understand the need for it, it reduces social interactions and physical activity. 'These changes increase the likelihood of

'Our research shows that physical activity like walking can enhance memory'

cognitive functions (basically anything we do from speaking and emotions to kicking a ball) are as a result of these communications. Memory is partly formed by changes to the structure and connection of these neurons. Throughout our lives we are constantly losing neurons (neurodegeneration) and creating new neurons (neurogenesis) with varying speed.'

When we are younger, the speed at which we make new neurons happens much quicker and the rate they decline gets faster the older we are.

However, physical activity, cognitive engagement and social interactions can all promote neurogenesis no matter what your age.

'Essentially, the brain is a large muscle and the more you use it, the stronger it becomes,' says Dr Javadi. 'Social interaction is actually a very complicated task that engages lots of different cognitive functions and engages almost all areas of the brain. For example, it involves actions like making phone calls



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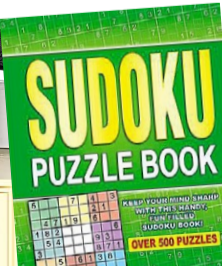
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neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia, as well as conditions such as stroke,' adds Dr Javadi. 'In addition, they decline rehabilitation of those with stroke.'

Excessive drinking, smoking and a sedentary lifestyle are some of the biggest factors for damaging neurons and increasing neurodegeneration, which can lead to dementia. 'Excessive drinking disrupts communication between neurons in the brain, which damages the neurons,' says Dr Javadi. 'Smoking is also harmful. It affects our lungs and reduces our oxygen intake. O₂ is one of the core elements in activity of the neurons. When you have a sedentary lifestyle, the blood circulation changes. It's important to have good blood circulation in the brain, and one of the first things that physical activity brings is cardiovascular fitness. This means the brain gets enough food to lead a healthy life and produce healthy neurons.'

Although the brain works as a whole, it's clear that everything is intrinsically linked and if you really want to start looking after your general cognitive health, Dr Javadi advises taking action right away.

'Individuals can encourage neurogenesis and reduce neurodegeneration with simple changes in their lifestyle; a healthy diet, reducing alcohol consumption and smoking and, importantly, increasing physical activity. Physical activity could be as simple as walking. You don't need to exhaust yourself to benefit from it because our research shows that physical activity can enhance memory, and even walking three times a week over a year can reverse the effects of neurodegeneration in older adults.'

Brain food for thought

CAN you boost cognitive function through food? Nutritionist Jenna Hope suggests five things to add to your diet.

DON'T THROW THE YOLKS
'Eggs are nutritional powerhouses. The yolks contain a key micronutrient called choline, which supports memory, mood and cognition.'



GET YOUR VITAMINS IN
'Vitamin D largely comes from the sun although foods such as salmon, mushrooms and eggs contain this vital brain power nutrient. As it's difficult to obtain enough Vitamin D through diet alone, it's recommended that teenagers and adults should supplement with 10µg/d to support optimal brain function, immune function and bone health.'



LET IT B
'B-vitamins are important for generating energy from your foods and maintaining a steady stream of energy to the brain. They can be found in wholegrains, eggs, fish, beans and pulses.'

EAT YOUR OILY FISH
'Oily fish is a great source of Omega-3 which is associated with improved concentration and better cognitive performance. Serve up two portions of fish weekly (with one being oily). Nuts (specifically walnuts) and seeds are also a source of Omega-3 although you'd need to consume these daily.'



SNACK ON BLACKBERRIES
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■ jennahopenutrition.com

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