

10 MICROHABITS FOR BRAIN HEALTH

Brought to you from your Health & Fitness Committee

Feeling overwhelmed with all the healthy practices you *should* adopt? Not enthusiastic about following what seems like the training schedule of an elite athlete or carefully measuring your intake of leafy greens and protein? Adding a small dose of drawing, chatting or walking to your day could power up your brain.

Here are 10 microhabits, or mini moves, that studies show may improve memory or processing speed, which is the time it takes your brain to take in, interpret and respond to information. No special equipment or expensive medications needed.

1. **Move after meals** - A five-minute walk after a meal can help keep blood sugar levels from spiking, and avoiding diabetes is one of the most important things you can do to support your brain health. In a review of seven studies among healthy adults, a light-intensity stroll after eating made a positive difference for blood sugar and insulin levels.
2. **Try cyclic sighing** - Stanford researchers found that five minutes of a simple type of breathing, two short breaths in through the nose followed by one slow exhale through the mouth, led to good feelings — energy, joy and peacefulness — and less anxiety. One or two of these sighs may be quickly calming, but to get the full effect, five minutes a day is ideal.
3. **Reach for the floss** - Devote two minutes to daily flossing and you'll lower your risk of stroke, according to a study that followed more than 6,200 people over 25 years. Overall rates of ischemic strokes, the type caused by a blockage in a blood vessel, were 22 percent lower for those who flossed than for nonflossers.
4. **Check in with a friend** - When older adults make time to connect with others, they improve memory and processing speed. A Pennsylvania State University study asked adults ages 70 to 90 to complete phone surveys a few times a day reporting their social interactions. Then they played a brain game that measured cognition. The 16-day study showed that on days following higher levels of socializing, cognitive performance was better.
5. **Try Meditation** - Sitting down, breathing and quieting your mind for just a few minutes each day helps boost the ability to think clearly. People ages 50 to 80 who used a meditation app for just eight to 15 minutes a day for

30 days were less distracted than when their training began, according to a University of Southern California study.

6. **Glance at a green space** - A walk in the woods or weeding the garden are two common recommendations to improve mental health. But even brief interactions with nature can help your brain. In an Australian study, participants who looked out the window onto a flowering, green roof for just 40 seconds improved their task performance over the participants who looked out onto a concrete scene.
7. **Draw — no experience necessary** - Even if you have no natural artistic ability, putting pencil to paper can offer brain benefits. In a pilot study among artists and nonartists ages 20 to 60, just three minutes of creating art had a positive impact. After participants doodled, colored or drew for that brief period, they all had high activation of their brain's reward center, leading to a sense of well-being.
8. **Admire someone else's art** - Next time you pass a gallery or museum, duck in and look at a painting. In England, visits to museums have been shown to reduce visits to the doctor. In a study in the Netherlands, just looking at a painting in a museum led to increased brain activity. Participants' brains lit up with 10 times more activity in the brain's precuneus, an area that deals with memory retrieval, identity and past experiences, than when they looked at reproductions of the same works.
9. **Give your pet some love** - Having a pet around can, over time, reduce its owner's brain age by 15 years. But you don't have to wait that long to notice a difference in how you feel. Just a few minutes of ear scratches can help. In a Swedish experiment, middle-aged adults were encouraged to pat their Labrador retrievers for three minutes. Blood samples were taken before the interaction and then in intervals afterward for the next hour. Both owner and dog released oxytocin, a hormone that promotes trust and attachment, and the humans lowered their cortisol, also known as the stress hormone.
10. **Jot it down** - Simply writing down just five events that happened to you each day before bed improves memory in older adults, including those with early stage Alzheimer's disease. In a study of 26 people at the University of Bristol Medical School, participants who jotted down details at the end of the day had better word recognition in cognitive tests the following morning. It's a low-cost, easy intervention for adults.

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