Exercise, diet can boost brain health

Physical activity can actually increase energy, says K-State specialist

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – It may seem, at times, that today’s busy lifestyles rarely leave us with enough time or energy for a brisk walk, jog, bike ride or swim. But where good health is concerned, science never sides with the couch potato.

In fact, Kansas State University’s Sharolyn Jackson notes that during moderate or vigorous activity, our bodies and brain produce hormones and neurotransmitters that improve our mood, enhance memory, increase energy levels and elevate our sense of well-being.

“These are the body’s ‘feel good’ chemicals at work,” said Jackson, K-State Research and Extension’s family and consumer science specialist in northeast Kansas. “While your muscles will feel tired after activity, you will probably feel more relaxed. You may also feel a sense of accomplishment, which gives you a boost of self-confidence. Feeling better as a result of movement can be a powerful motivator.”

Jackson noted that the most current research on brain health indicates these key interventions:

- Increase physical activity.
- Control blood pressure and blood cholesterol.
- Get adequate quality sleep.
- Be social.
- Eat healthfully.
- Challenge your brain by developing new skills throughout your life.

Jackson is coordinator of the popular eight-week program, Walk Kansas, which draws an average of 4,500 participants each year. That program encourages individuals to set a goal to exercise for at least 150 minutes each week, a guideline recommended by the Alzheimer’s Association for brain health.
“Physical activity provides so many health benefits,” Jackson said. “While more research is needed on how physical activity impacts the brain, we do know that it boosts blood flow to the brain and it helps to counter some of the natural reduction in brain connections that occur during the aging process. Regular physical activity also helps to reduce falls, helps with depression, management of diabetes and high blood pressure and helps one to remain independent. Perhaps all of these combined contribute to better brain health.”

The best physical activity, Jackson said, “is one that you will actually do.”

“Walking is great and it is something almost everyone can do. Other activities like water exercise, rolling (for those in a wheelchair), yard work, tennis, pickleball, and some team sports are also great. The main thing is to work hard enough so you can still talk and carry on a conversation, but not sing. Just find something you enjoy and do it often.”

In addition to exercising regularly, a healthy diet is good for the brain, Jackson said.

“Nutrition plays a key role in cognitive decline and research points to a combination of the Mediterranean eating style and the DASH (Dietary Actions to Stop Hypertension) diet to support brain health and reduce your risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and some types of cancer,” Jackson said. “The MIND diet is a hybrid of these two eating styles and following it can slow brain aging by 7 ½ years and lessen chances of developing Alzheimer's disease.”

For brain health, some foods that are especially beneficial, according to Jackson, include:

- Leafy green vegetables – eat these every day.
- Other vegetables and fruit, especially berries.
- Whole grains.
- Fish -- eat twice a week.
- Poultry.
- Beans.
- Nuts.
- Olive Oil.

Jackson suggests limiting servings of red meat, sweets, cheese, butter or margarine, processed foods and fried foods.

“You can enjoy a glass of wine each day, but be mindful that the way your body handles alcohol can change as you age,” she said. Excessive drinking – eight drinks per week for women and 15 drinks per week for men – is linked to an increased risk of dementia; moderate alcohol consumption (one 5 ounce glass per day for women, two for men) does not seem to increase the risk.

“This is one area where we need to watch research, though, as recommendations may change,” she said. “And, if you don’t drink alcohol now, it is not a good idea to start drinking it for any possible benefits.”

Jackson recommends consulting with your physician to better understand your risks for
dementia and other diseases, and for advice on physical activity and diet.

“You can have no family history for a disease and still develop it,” she said. “Research shows that those who have a parent or sibling with Alzheimer’s are more likely to develop it themselves. If you have more than one first degree relative, the risk is even higher.”

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