



WALKING THE PATH TO A BETTER MEMORY

New research shows moderate exercise reduces risk of dementia in seniors.

BY MEGAN TSAI

A recent study published in the medical journal *Neurology* followed a group of 65-year-old men and women in Italy. At the end of the four-year study, results found that seniors who took a brisk walk more often saw their risk of dementia drop 27 percent compared to those who walked the least. Other recent studies—such as a 2006 study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*—have shown similar results.

According to a MetLife survey, more Americans fear Alzheimer's disease than heart disease, stroke or diabetes. As a result, educating seniors about the link between moderate exercise and reduced dementia risk may encourage more activity. "The protective effect of exercise against mental deterioration and loss of independence might be a powerful motivator," said study author Giovanni Ravaglia, MD, with S. Orsola-Malpighi University Hospital in Bologna, Italy.

The Facts About Vascular Dementia

Memory loss, confusion and agitation are symptoms most commonly associated with Alzheimer's disease; vascular dementia produces similar effects. Vascular dementia occurs when the blood vessels that feed the brain narrow or close, reducing blood flow to portions of the brain. Sometimes a result of a series of strokes or undetectable mini-strokes, this constriction causes reduced cognitive function.

Vascular dementia can be hard to recognize. One of the first symptoms of Alzheimer's is memory loss, which typically occurs much later with vascular dementia. Normally, vascular dementia first causes a decreased ability to organize thoughts or actions, making it tough to multitask or communicate thoughts in a sequential way. As a result, the symptoms of vascular dementia can be confused with what many consider a "natural" side effect of aging.

Vascular dementia often goes hand-in-hand with Alzheimer's disease. In fact, many researchers believe it is more common for these diseases to occur together than apart. This often makes it difficult to distinguish symptoms of one disease from the other, and further complicates research into their cause and prevention.

Moderate Exercise, Maximum Results

The most important finding of the Italian study is that seniors don't need to work until they're exhausted to achieve the decreased risk of vascular dementia. "Contrary to what many

seniors believe, it is not necessary to reach an excellence level in a specific sport or engage in vigorous and physically demanding activities in order to enjoy the benefits of physical activity," said Ravaglia.

In the study, the types of exercises linked to decreased vascular dementia risk were brisk walking, house chores, yard work, gardening and light carpentry. "I'd recommend walking for at least 30 minutes a day, almost every day of the week," said Ravaglia. "It is the simplest and cheapest type of exercise, it is not physically demanding, and can be performed by people who are not used to sports or regular physical exercise."

Pointing out the proven benefits of exercise—even with a small time commitment and a straightforward exercise such as brisk walking—might provide some extra education and motivation for seniors. "It should be emphasized that moderate-intensity exercise will lead to significant health benefits," said Utz. "The intimidation of difficult, sweaty and painful exercise prevents many seniors from beginning an exercise program."

The Mind-body Mystery

Science has just begun discovering the mysterious connections between mental function and physical health. But thanks to a rapidly growing body of research, we now know exercise can help seniors ward off one of the most frightening effects of aging—mental deterioration.

"The mind-body connection is a complex idea and it's important to talk to the client and help them understand the link between physical and mental fitness," said Utz. "As fitness professionals, it is our job to supplement this information with actions to help the client succeed and experience the benefits of exercise."

Researchers have yet to understand how exercise may help the fight against other debilitating forms of dementia, such as Alzheimer's. However, through motivation and education, senior clients can grow along a path to better health—and better memory. **AF**

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I'm too busy. It's too expensive. I'm worried I'll hurt myself. I'm too tired. Young or old, these are the reasons fitness professionals often hear from clients reluctant to begin or stick with an exercise program.

Working with senior clients can present additional obstacles as well. "When seniors were young, there was not as much participation in regular physical activity," said Sarah Utz, an exercise physiologist at the National Institute for Fitness and Sport in Indianapolis, Ind. "There was little emphasis on regular exercise, partly due to lack of knowledge of the benefits of exercise, and also due to fewer conveniences."

To help senior clients overcome barriers to a regular exercise program, fitness and health professionals are constantly looking for new ways to educate and motivate. And encouraging new research on the link between physical and mental fitness may be just the key to help get seniors up and moving.

The Mind-body Link

Exercise helps us ward off a variety of physical health problems such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease. But a growing body of evidence shows exercise can also help prevent the frightening effects of vascular dementia—the most common form of dementia aside from Alzheimer's disease.

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