

Dr. Steven's CHIP Health Blog - Exercising your brain

Do you feel that your memory is not what it used to be? As we age, most of us recognize that our ability to remember names, dates, or where we left our wallet and keys only gets worse. Now, for the first time there is proof that exercising regularly may be an effective treatment to delay the age related decline in memory that most of us will experience.

The hippocampus is a part of the brain associated with memory. With increasing age, it tends to shrink and this is associated with impaired memory and an increased risk for dementia or the signs of Alzheimer's disease. On the other hand, the hippocampus is typically larger in more physically fit adults and exercise training increases the blood flow to this area of the brain.

If physically fit adults are known to have better blood circulation to the brain and a lower risk of dementia, one might speculate

that increasing one's physical activity level might offer a simple strategy to reduce the effects of aging on memory. Finally, a randomized clinical trial has provided clear evidence to support this theory.

Kirk Erickson and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh recently published a study clearly demonstrating that among older adults, with an average age of 66 years, aerobic exercise training increases the size of the hippocampus, leading to improvements in memory. In this landmark study, 120 adults were randomly assigned to two groups. One group was taught to exercise aerobically three times/week for 40 minutes each time. Interestingly, the aerobic program was identical to the one we use at CHIP including the use of heart rate monitors to ensure that subjects exercised with sufficient intensity. The second group spent the same amount of time

stretching.

After one year of aerobic exercise training, the size of the hippocampus increased by 2% on average, effectively reversing the shrinking expected with aging. At the same time, the participants in the aerobic exercise group were observed to improve their scores on a specific memory test. The group that only stretched regularly did not show any improvements as their memory test scores declined while this area of the brain shrank in size as expected.

These important findings indicate that aerobic exercise training is effective at preventing shrinkage of the hippocampus which in turn is associated with improved memory.

The conclusion...exercise is good for the heart and great for the brain!

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<http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2011/01/25/1015950108.abstract>



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