

Lifestyle Tips



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Lifestyle Tips for Exercise and the Brain



Most of us know that physical activity is good for our bodies, but did you know that physical activity is also

good for your brain? A little movement may make one *feel* sharper—but increased physical activity can even have a measurable impact on students' reading and math grades. In fact, if you want your kids to excel in school, you may want to encourage them to

hit a ball around after school rather than just hit the books.

In an effort to increase students' academic performance, many schools are choosing to reduce physical education (PE) requirements—and even the time allocated for recess.



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However, no empirical evidence has suggested that academic performance is hindered in any way by regular participation in PE and physical activity. In fact, the majority of empirical evidence suggests the opposite is true—academic performance is actually *improved* by engagement in regular physical activity, even if the active time is taken away from other subjects.¹ If parents, teachers and education policy makers are concerned about academic performance, they should consider increases in physical education, physical activity and sport opportunities in school.

So, how can running around more actually run up your marks? Physical activity positively impacts academic performance by improving cognitive functions such as memory and concentration, increasing cerebral blood flow, increasing self-esteem, self-confidence and self-image, and increasing feelings of school connectedness.

And the benefits of physical activity on the brain do not stop when we graduate. Regular physical activity will keep you sharp as you age, and is particularly important for older adults. Research shows that increased levels of physical activity are linked to reduced risks of dementia. And you

don't have to become a late-blooming marathon runner to pump up your grey matter. Even modest levels of activity are beneficial, such as a few daily walks up and down stairs. The regular bouts of physical activity help maintain a good blood supply, which keeps the brain supply of oxygen up. Keeping your brain's oxygen supply up is important, because reduced oxygen supply, or hypoxia, of the brain promotes the production of the protein beta amyloid, which is associated with Alzheimer's disease.²

So, when you're feeling sluggish and you need a little mental pick-me-up, try reaching for your walking shoes. Walking is especially good for your brain, because it increases blood circulation, which feeds your noggin with oxygen and glucose. Maybe this is why walking can "clear your head" and help you to think better—with every step you take, you're actually oxygenating your brain. Plus, the moderate to vigorous movement increases your breathing and heart rate, so that more blood flows to the brain, enhancing overall energy production and waste removal.

Take steps towards a healthier—and smarter—you with the small choices you make, every day, to be more active. Join a team or club, go

for a run, play in the park or take the stairs. And in the morning, before you even get out of bed, try wiggling, scrunching and stretching your toes. Research shows that wiggling your toes actually activates nerves that stimulate your brain.

Whether you are moving your toes, moving furniture or mountain-biking to and from work, there are plenty of ways to get more physical activity into your day. It's the smart thing to do!

¹Active Healthy Kids Canada. (2009). Active Kids are Fit to Learn: Canada's Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth 2009. Toronto, ON.

²Alzheimer Society. (2010). Rising Tide: The Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society Retrieved from http://www.alzheimer.ca/docs/RisingTide/Rising20Tide_Full%20Report_Eng_FINAL_Secured%20version.pdf