

LIFE HEALTH

Give your body a mental workout



By Melissa Carr, Special to 24 hours
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Traditional Chinese medicine offers everything from foods to herbs to acupuncture to help keep your brain sharp. (FOTOLIA)

Forgetfulness with regard to aging is sometimes relayed as a joke - as in, "I forgot what I came into this room for. It must be my senior's brain is kicking in." But a deterioration in memory, slower response rate, diminished mental acuity, and certainly dementia and Alzheimer's, are no laughing matter. An aging brain may also experience problems with sleep, fatigue and depression.

The good news is that this is not a certainty. Many are able to maintain their brain power and mental sharpness well into their later years. Part of keeping a healthy brain is continuing to use and challenge it — use it or lose it. Taking courses, learning a new skill, doing something creative, volunteering, meeting new people, and practicing daily brain challenges all help to keep neural

connections of the brain.

Traditional Chinese medicine has long sought ways to prolong life and vitality. Chinese herbs cross over into the category of foods, with dates, lotus seeds, Chinese yams, mushrooms, turmeric, and all kinds of legumes, nuts, and seeds recommended to support energy and mental function.

Ginseng, wolfberry (goji berry), and reishi mushroom are some of TCM's most powerful and versatile herbs for promoting a longer, more astute life. We now know that ginseng has some adaptogenic properties, allowing the body to better accommodate changes and stress. Talk to a qualified practitioner to find out first, however, about which type of ginseng is best for you. Goji berries are now found in your local grocery store, and these little red berries really pack a punch. Full of antioxidant compounds, like zeaxanthin and carotene, and also a variety of polysaccharides, they have protective effects on brain cells. Also an anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory, reishi assists protection of DNA from damage, supporting healthy brain nerves and neurons, even helping to prevent strokes.

Acupuncture has been demonstrated to treat diseases related to brain health. By improving glucose metabolism (energy) and healthy blood circulation to the brain, acupuncture can support management of dementia. Acupuncture has also been studied with an fMRI to see what is happening in the brain during needling, and the imaging confirmed the activation of cognitive-related areas in patients with mild cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's.

You don't need to wait for the decline before you work on your brain health. Start now to take care of your body's most important part.

Dr. Melissa Carr is a registered doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, caring for patients in an integrative medicine clinic in Vancouver.

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