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Memory Fitness Techniques Could Improve Your Recall

A memory fitness program offered to older adults in their senior living communities helped improve their ability to recognize and recall words, benefiting their verbal learning and retention, according to a study published online July 14, 2011, in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (AJGP). As a result of the program, seniors' self-perceived memory improved—an important factor in maintaining a positive outlook on life while aging.

"The study was exciting in that it confirmed previous studies showing that changing lifestyle habits, in addition to learning simple, effective memory strategies, can improve memory performance in older adults," says Cynthia R. Green, PhD, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Mount Sinai and president of Memory Arts, LLC.

Common cognitive changes The brain contains nerve cells (neurons) that transmit information, but nerve cells, and the connections between them, decrease in number with age. This compromises their ability to function optimally. "Aging can negatively impact our attention, the speed at which we process information, our ability to multi-task, and our ability to reason abstractly," explains Dr. Green. "All of these functions are critical to short-term memory,



Information is transmitted through the brain via nerve cells (neurons), but age can compromise their ability to function efficiently.

since they affect our capacity to learn and encode, or 'save,' new information, such as a name."

What types of memory issues are most common among senior adults? "I find that people most frequently complain about daily changes in short-term memory that are frustrating," says Dr. Green. "For example, folks will have a harder time remembering a name, something they heard in conversation, or information that they read. I also hear complaints

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Massage Therapy May Be Best for Your Back Pain

If the idea of treating your lower back pain conjures up images of surgery and other invasive procedures, relax. Relief may be in the hands of a skilled massage therapist.

A study published in the July 5 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that both structural and relaxation (Swedish) massage are effective in relieving chronic low back pain and improving daily function. The results are encouraging news, as low back pain is a condition that an estimated nine out of 10 people deal with at some point in

their lives. Low back pain is also among the most common reasons people see doctors and alternative medicine specialists, such as massage therapists. Older adults are especially vulnerable to low back pain.

Joseph Elder, MA, LMT, a massage therapist at Mount Sinai, explains that older adults are at a higher risk of low back pain for several reasons. The list includes a lack of adequate and specific exercise for the body's core and spine, disuse atrophy, poor body awareness and biomechanics, structural weaknesses

(such as osteoporosis), and inadequate stretching and flexibility, as well as general wear and tear, repeated trauma and genetic disposition.

"Degenerative changes, such as osteoarthritis, spinal stenosis and medical comorbidities, may further limit an older patient's ability to participate in exercise," Elder adds.

Massage benefits Massage is an ancient practice, but it has become an accepted medical treatment in recent

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Good lifestyle factors add up to significantly lower diabetes risk

People with several good lifestyle factors, such as not over-consuming alcohol, eating a healthy diet, doing exercise, not smoking, and being of normal weight, are much less likely to develop type 2 diabetes, according to a study published Sept 6 in *Annals of Internal Medicine*. The study followed more than 207,000 people, age 50 to 71 years, over an 11-year period. None had evidence of diabetes, cancer or heart disease at the beginning of the study; 9.6 percent (11,031) of the men and 7.5 percent (6,969) of the women developed new-onset diabetes during follow-up. Those participants with the greatest number of positive lifestyle factors had an 80 percent lower chance of developing diabetes compared to those with the fewest. Each factor alone also contributed to the increased risk.

Markers that indicate B12 deficiency linked with brain shrinkage

Too little vitamin B12 may be associated with smaller brain size and more problems with thinking skills as people age, according to a study published Sept 27 in *Neurology*. The 121 study participants, age 65 and older, underwent blood tests to check for their levels of B12 and B12-related metabolites, which can give an indication of a B12 deficiency. They were also assessed for memory and other cognitive skills. About four-and-a-half years later, MRI scans of their brains were taken to see how big their brains were, as well as identify some other signs of brain damage. Those with each of the four metabolites, but not B12, had a higher risk of having a decrease in their cognitive test score and total brain volume. Vitamin B12 plays a key role in nervous system functioning and brain development. However, while the data deserve further examination, it's too early to say whether increasing vitamin B12 levels in older people through diet or supplements could prevent the problems shown by the study. 



By Rosanne M. Leipzig, MD, PhD
Editor-in-Chief

Resistance *isn't* futile...

Exercise is one of the best methods available to you when it comes to helping to prevent poor health as you age. Despite this, research suggests that older adults spend almost 60 percent of their time in sedentary behaviors—and that sedentary lifestyle is associated with an increased risk of weight gain, as well as heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

Part of our mission here at *Focus on Healthy Aging* is to demonstrate to you that climbing out of that sedentary rut isn't as difficult as you may think. Getting sufficient physical activity doesn't require you to join the gym and go for the burn. Exercise doesn't have to be formal: You can build it into everyday life and activities by speeding up while you do chores such as vacuuming, using stairs instead of elevators wherever possible, parking further away from the store when you go grocery shopping, and walking a circuit of the store or mall before you start stopping off to purchase items.

These are all examples of aerobic exercise—but maintaining muscle strength also is key as you age, and it can make all the difference when it comes to preserving your mobility and independence. It's recommended that older adults engage in muscle-strengthening activities two or more days a week, and the National Osteoporosis Foundation recommends it for helping to prevent osteoporosis. To that end, our new monthly exercise article (see page 5) aims to show you simple resistance-training exercises you can do at home to build up your fitness and strength levels gradually.

If you have a health condition such as heart disease or arthritis, you may be reticent to engage in resistance training for fear of causing discomfort or endangering your well being. Try not to be put off. Building muscle strength in arthritic joints can alleviate the discomfort of osteoarthritis, while the American Heart Association says strength training is safe for low-risk cardiac patients whose heart disease is stable. If you're in any doubt, ask your physician if strength training is safe for you and if your condition precludes certain exercises.

While it has the potential to help you age more healthfully, exercise also has the potential to cause injury if you've previously led a sedentary lifestyle, if you overdo it, or if you ignore any distress signals from your body. You're at greater risk of injuring yourself while exercising if your muscles are stiff, so spend five minutes warming up beforehand (marching on the spot while swinging your arms is a good technique). Ease into your resistance-training session gradually, by using lighter weights to perform your usual routine before switching to heavier weights. If you have arthritis, taking acetaminophen a half-hour or so before you exercise can help alleviate discomfort afterwards.

After engaging in any form of exercise, your muscles should feel like they got a good workout, but you should be able to use them without a problem. Exercise “red flags” include breathlessness, chest tightness or pain—if you experience these while exercising, stop immediately and seek medical advice if necessary. 

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Find the Right At-Home Caregiver

As we age, we become more susceptible to ailments and injuries that may affect our ability to care for ourselves. Many older adults in this situation relocate to a nursing home or assisted living facility, but if you want to retain more independence and continue to reside in your present home, an at-home caregiver can assist with activities of daily living and help with household chores such as shopping and housework.

According to the CDC, about 1.4 million Americans require the help of a paid caregiver each year. “When someone needs help at home, their loved ones are often lost about how to choose the right caregiver,” says Sheila Barton, LCSW, a social worker in the Brookdale Department of Geriatrics and Adult Medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. “The answer depends on the aide’s personality, finances, the patient’s care needs, and the ability of the family to become involved in care.”

Barton says that personal recommendations are invaluable. “If a trusted friend has hired a home attendant for similar caregiving responsibilities, that recommendation is worth its weight in gold. You know automatically that the individual is reliable, trustworthy, and has done their job. You also know what the individual charges.”

Barton also recommends obtaining two or more recommendations, going back in the person’s work history. “When you are interviewing the individual, ask about their work with previous patients,” says Barton. “Do they have experience with dementia patients? How would they handle a situation where a patient absolutely refused to bathe, or follow their instructions? What would they do in specific situations involving safety?”

Certification is sometimes important

Ask if the prospective caregiver has attended the 75-hour training required for home health-aide certification. This training teaches the aide how to care for a disabled patient (i.e., helping with dressing, bathing, feeding, toileting, etc.). If custodial care needs are minimal and you are hiring the individual for supervision and safety issues, then this training may not be necessary. Also, many individuals from foreign countries do not have this certification, but have significant hospital and medical experience.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- ◇ For patients with significant medical and custodial care needs, Barton recommends using a certified agency. Agencies tend to be more expensive, but their workers are supervised by a registered nurse (RN).
- ◇ Certified agencies have certified home health aides. Also, for the family member who cannot provide on-site supervision and direction, the agency can have their supervising RNs provide this supervision.
- ◇ Your local aging ombudsman or Agency for Aging can provide contact information for social workers in your locality.
- ◇ Tread carefully when it comes to website advertisements for homecare agencies and services. Your local Alzheimer’s Association representative (call 1-800-272-3900) can refer you to social services and reputable homecare agencies in your area, as can the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers (www.caremanager.org).

It’s important to look at the person’s resume and call their references.

Paying for your caregiver Because custodial care at home is a significant expense, many patients without long-term-care insurance cannot fund homecare indefinitely. “At that point, the patient and/or family member needs to talk to a social worker about the possibility of Medicaid funding for all or part of their home support services,” Barton says. “For those with Medicaid, there is also something called ‘consumer-directed home care,’ where a patient can hire a private home attendant, have them register with a Medicaid-funded consumer-directed homecare agency, and that agency will pay the worker the going Medicaid rate for hourly service.”

If you are planning to use consumer-directed homecare services, keep in mind that the patient and/or family must be willing to supervise the home attendant and be available in emergencies. 

High salt-low exercise may increase cognitive decline

A recent study (*Neurobiology of Aging*, Aug 19) suggests that older adults who are physically inactive and have a high sodium intake have a higher risk of cognitive decline. Older adults are advised to limit salt consumption to no more than 1,500 milligrams (mg) per day, but in this Canadian study, low intake was classed as no more than 2,263 mg/day, medium intake as no more than 3,090 mg/day, and high intake as a minimum of 3,090 mg/day. Older adults who led a sedentary lifestyle but had a low sodium intake displayed less cognitive decline across the study period than those who had greater salt intake. This is the first study to link salt intake to brain health in older individuals. The data are especially relevant, as munching on high-salt processed snacks when engaged in sedentary activities, such as watching the television, is a frequent pastime for many adults. Avoiding these behaviors may help you maintain a healthy brain as you age.

Spinal surgery can put older adults at risk

Several factors that increase the risk for different types of complications and death shortly after spine surgery are outlined in a new study that pinpoints older age, and several health conditions associated with advancing years, as risk factors. The study looked at surgeries performed for conditions such as herniated disc, spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal) and degenerative disc disease. The complication rate within 30 days after surgery was 7.6 percent, and major complications included pneumonia, deep vein thrombosis, and deep wound infections. Less-serious complications included urinary tract infections and superficial wound infections. Risk factors for complications included older age, congestive heart failure or history of heart attack, neurological problems before surgery, and corticosteroid use. Many studies illustrate the safety of spine surgery, but if your physician recommends it, ask about his/her complication rates and whether you can try non-invasive approaches, such as physical therapy. 

Bite Back with Tooth Replacement

Every tooth in your mouth plays an important role in speaking, chewing and in maintaining proper alignment of your other teeth—however, the passing years subject the teeth to decay and wear and tear. A 2010 study of over 1,000 post-menopausal women indicated that around one in four were likely to suffer tooth loss over a five-year period, and the risk increased to nearly 90 percent if other risk factors were present, especially diabetes and smoking.

“Often the loss of teeth without replacement begins a downward spiral in health due to dietary deficiencies that arise from not being able to chew properly,” notes Alan B. Sheiner, DDS, assistant clinical professor of dentistry at Mount Sinai. If you’ve experienced tooth loss or other dental problems, how can you restore function and improve the appearance of your teeth?

Restoring your teeth There are several reconstructive options available to you:

• **Veneers** These are thin porcelain or resin composite shells that are bonded to the front of the teeth in order to change their color, shape, size, or length. “They can be utilized for front teeth that are worn down, misaligned, and/or chipped, broken or irregularly shaped,” says Dr. Sheiner. “As the veneer is very thin, the tooth itself doesn’t require much shaping or filing.”

• **Crowns** These tooth-shaped “caps” fit over an existing tooth, and require more of the existing tooth to be filed away so that the finished crowned tooth isn’t too bulky. “Crowns are used to replace severely decayed or worn-down teeth,” Dr. Sheiner notes.

• **Removable partial dentures** These may be suitable if you’ve lost several teeth but retain some. “They consist of replacement teeth incorporated into a gum-colored resin base or metal base that attaches to the remaining natural teeth with metal or tooth colored clasps,” says Dr. Sheiner. “You may also use special prefabricated attachments.”

• **Fixed partial dentures/partial bridge** This option consists of one or more false teeth that are fused between two crowns that are then fitted to the teeth on either side of a gap.

• **Complete dentures** are artificial teeth set into a resin base, and are used in people who have lost all of their teeth. “Changes to the gums and supporting jawbones are ongoing, particularly if all the teeth have been lost,” Dr. Sheiner observes. “This does affect the fit and make periodic adjustments necessary.”

What about dental implants? Dental implants are effectively replacement tooth roots made from titanium that are embedded in the socket of a missing tooth/teeth to provide a foundation for fixed or removable replacement teeth. Once the

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ◇ Maintain a careful cleaning and hygiene routine with dentures, and with any remaining natural teeth.
- ◇ If dentures are slipping or making your gums sore, get the fit checked.
- ◇ Brush and floss crowns thoroughly, since decay can still occur at the gumline and affect the natural tooth under the crown.
- ◇ If you are having problems paying for treatment, your state dental association may be able to help – visit the American Dental Association website (www.ada.org/ada/organizations/) for a listing.

implant has bonded to the jawbone (in about six weeks) a post is attached to it and a crown is attached to the post.

Dr. Sheiner says that dental implants can be a good solution for older adults in whom the teeth adjacent to a gap aren’t strong enough to anchor a partial bridge or partial dentures. “The finished result is more natural looking,” he notes, “but not everyone is a candidate for implants, and they also cost more.” If you’re considering implants, get evaluated by your dentist (also consider getting a second opinion) to find out what your best options are. 

Option	Price	Points to consider
 Veneers	\$700-\$1,000 per tooth	Involves minimal removal of tooth surface; stain resistant; new veneers are needed if chips or cracks occur; not suitable for people with diseased gums or those who grind their teeth
 Crowns	\$600-\$1,500 per tooth	Involves more removal of tooth surface than veneers; all-porcelain crowns are not as durable as porcelain fused to metal; root canal treatment may be required
 Dentures	\$1,000-\$2,500 per upper/lower arch	Minor irritation may occur to gums; saliva flow may increase as you become accustomed to wearing them; eating with them takes practice; if upper dentures are fitted, palate is covered, which may affect the taste of food; gums and bones shrink over time; periodic adjustments are necessary
 Partial dentures/partial bridge	\$1,000-\$3,000 per tooth	May be suitable if one or more natural teeth remain in the upper or lower jaw; prevents any remaining teeth from changing position in the mouth; can be removable or fixed (bridge) using crowns (shown)
 Implants	\$2,000-\$4,000 per implant	These offer improved fit, comfort and speech; eating is easier as they function like natural teeth; more of the remaining teeth are left intact

*Cost depends on where you live, materials used and location of restoration. Most dental insurers cover some or all of the cost of crowns and dentures—check specific coverage with your insurer. Medicare does not cover restorative dentistry.

Boost Your Thigh Strength for Improved Comfort and Balance

Strong quadriceps (thigh) muscles reduce the pain of arthritic knees, and also may protect against cartilage loss in the knees, according to research findings. They also can help you avoid back pain and boost your balance.

However, older adults tend to have reduced leg strength, and a new study (*Journal of Electromyography and Kinesiology*, October) suggests that older overweight women are particularly at risk. How do the quadriceps confer their protective effect, and what simple exercises can you do to boost strength in these vital muscles?

Crucial for movement The quadriceps is the largest muscle in the body, and is located at the front of the thigh. It is divided into four portions, all of which attach to the patella (kneecap), and one of which (rectus femoris) attaches to the ileum (the uppermost bone of the pelvis). “As such, it’s crucial for motion that involves flexing the hip—for example, walking, running and squatting—and also for stabilizing the knee joint while you walk,” says David Thomas, MD, associate professor of medicine and rehabilitative medicine at Mount Sinai.

Strong quadriceps enable you to walk extended distances, ascend and descend stairs, and participate in sports or recreational activities, such as dancing. “They also protect your back if you need to bend down to lift a

heavy object,” Dr. Thomas observes. “If your quads are weak, you’ll tend to use your back, rather than your legs, to help you lift—instead of bending at the knees, you’ll bend at the waist, which places your back at risk.”

Strong quads also help when it comes to maintaining your balance. “If your quads are strong, you’re less likely to fall if you trip or experience an unexpected change in momentum, such as might happen on a subway or a bus, for example, than if your legs are weak,” Dr. Thomas explains.

Shock absorber One of the most important benefits of strengthening your quads is that the muscles can act as a “shock absorber.” When you walk or run, every time you take a step the impact of hitting the ground sends forces through the joints of your legs. “Having strong quads is one way to dissipate some of those forces and decrease wear and tear on the knee joints,” Dr. Thomas says. “This is particularly important if the joints are already compromised by arthritis or another condition.”

Although squats are among the best exercises to strengthen your quads, Dr. Thomas cautions that it’s not necessary—and could be harmful to your knees—to do full, deep squats. Instead, try the Chair Squat exercise shown here, as well as the Step Up, which isolates the quad muscle to help improve its strength. 

Exercises to Boost Thigh Strength

1. Step Up Stand at the bottom of a staircase or other sturdy step, keeping your feet flat and toes facing forward.



Step up onto the step with your right foot, straightening your right leg; then place your left foot next to your right. Then step down with your right foot, followed by your left foot. Repeat 10 times starting with your right foot stepping up and down first, then 10 times with your left foot stepping up and down. Do three sets for each foot (if

you’re unsteady on your feet, hold onto a banister or hand rail for balance).

2. Chair Squat

Stand in front of a chair. Bend your hips and knees as though you were going to sit down, but hover above the seat or tap down lightly with the buttocks instead; then, come back up to the standing position. Make sure your knees do not extend beyond your toes as you squat.



Decongestants

Decongestants are used to relieve the nasal congestion that accompanies allergies, colds and flu, and also for treating sinus infections. Most decongestants are available over-the-counter (in most states, pseudoephedrine is available only after talking with a pharmacist) and can be taken orally or topically, via nasal spray. As nasal congestion is only one of several symptoms associated with colds, decongestants also occur in many cough-and-cold medications, in combination with other ingredients.

Are they effective? Nasal congestion occurs when the membranes lining the nasal passages swell due to inflamed blood vessels. Decongestants narrow the blood vessels, reducing swelling and inflammation.

Important precautions Because oral decongestants constrict blood vessels, they are not recommended for people with heart disease, angina, high blood pressure, diabetes, or kidney disease. They can also precipitate acute attacks of glaucoma and, in those with prostate enlargement, cause difficulty urinating and even urinary retention. Pseudoephedrine, in particular, can present a risk to older adults, even when taken at indicated dosages.

Possible side effects Decongestants are generally considered safe for healthy adults who use the medication only when needed. Side effects most often occur in people with certain health problems (those with the health conditions detailed above should not take decongestants). Common side effects include nervousness, dizziness, poor sleep, raised blood pressure, and a noticeable or rapid heart beat. Prolonged use (longer than three to five days) of topical decongestants can lead to rebound swelling of the nasal membranes, and nasal stuffiness.

Drug options Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed 12/24), phenylephrine (Sudafed PE, 4-Way Fast-Acting nasal spray), naphazoline (Privine nasal spray), oxymetazoline (Afrin nasal spray). 

MEMORY *cont. from page 1*

about it taking longer to retrieve well-learned information, such as a word or the name of an actor. However, these types of memory changes are not necessarily indicative of progressive memory loss.”

Improve your memory In the *AJGP* study, researchers provided study participants with a six-week “Memory Fitness Program” that included memory training, physical activity, stress reduction, and a healthy diet. Cognitive testing following the six-week program revealed improvements in both encoding and recalling new verbal information. In practical terms, they were better at storing and accessing information, such as lists of words they had been given.

According to Dr. Green, older adults can take home the practical advice from all such programs to lead a memory-healthy lifestyle and practice simple memory strategies to enhance their daily memory experience, and potentially lower their risk for dementia over their lifetimes. “I teach a very simple principle to enhance memory,” she adds. “I have coined the phrase ‘The A.M. Principle,’ since it is intended to ‘wake up’ your memory.”

• **A stands for attention** If you improve your attention to information you want to learn and remember, you will be more

effective at doing so. First, be aware and make the effort to pay attention. Second, lead a lifestyle that supports attention—get enough rest, and control your intake of caffeine and alcohol. Third, do mental exercises that boost attention, such as timed games, or engage in mindfulness or meditative activities to help you focus.

• **M stands for meaning** Information that is more meaningful to you is easier to remember. The best memory strategies work because they make information more meaningful. For example, if you make a connection between someone’s name—say, “Florence”—and someone you already know with that name, such as Florence Nightingale, you’ll make that new name more meaningful and easier to remember.

Address memory concerns If you are worried about your memory, Dr. Green recommends speaking with your doctor about your concerns. She also points out that sometimes memory problems may be due to other conditions or factors. “Often, we don’t consider that memory loss may be a symptom, and not in and of itself a disease,” she says. “In fact, memory problems are a symptom of over 70 different disorders, such as vitamin B12 deficiency, thyroid imbalance, and/or depression.” Another possibility

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ◇ Stay physically active. Studies have linked exercise with a lower incidence of mild cognitive impairment as well as an improvement in cognitive functioning.
- ◇ Get an annual physical exam, and follow your doctor’s treatment recommendations for any health conditions you have.
- ◇ Check to see if a memory program is available in your area. If not, engage in mentally stimulating activities, and stay socially active.

is medication: Many prescription drugs can have an impact on your memory. So can major life changes, such as retirement, relocation, or illness or death of a loved one.

Dr. Green emphasizes that early evaluation is key to identifying what may be causing changes in memory and getting help. And, even if the changes are part of the normal aging process, it is possible to learn skills to better manage your memory. 

MASSAGE *cont. from page 1*

years, especially with research such as this recent study, Elder says. But he adds that patients should be careful in selecting the right form of massage therapy, because they differ greatly.

Swedish massage, for example, employs a combination of five different massage strokes and varying degrees of pressing, rubbing and stretching muscles to improve circulation and release tightness, Elder notes.

“Structural massage techniques usually focus on loosening connective tissue, such as tendons that have grown short and tight due to trauma or wear and tear,” he says. “Swedish and structural massage therapies have been shown to help reduce muscle tightness that causes postural imbalances, injury and limited, painful movement.”

Elder adds that anyone can benefit from massage therapy, including hospitalized patients with serious illnesses.

“However, people should choose a type of massage therapy that meets their specific needs,” he says. “The patient’s condition and the therapeutic goals of the session should determine the type of massage technique chosen.”

For example, Elder says that a frail person with back pain should probably select a type of massage that is more gentle and not as “forceful or aggressive.” Having blood clots, osteoporosis and spinal fractures, and/or certain cancers and infections may influence what type of massage you receive.

Elder notes that the authors of the study speculate that at least some of the benefits the patients experienced were influenced by lifestyle factors that were considered by the researchers, such as exercise, stretching and relaxation techniques. He explains, “All of these add up to a healthier lifestyle, and all have the potential to reduce muscle tension and pain.” 

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Different types of massage include:

- ◇ **Swedish** The most common type of massage, this combines long, flowing strokes with kneading or tapping of specific muscles.
- ◇ **Cranio-sacral** Incorporates gentle manipulation of the head, spine and pelvis.
- ◇ **Neuromuscular** Continuous pressure is applied to specific locations to increase blood flow.
- ◇ **Shiatsu** Pressure is applied to points that correspond with acupuncture points.
- ◇ **Structural** Gentle pressure that focuses on relieving and correcting soft-tissue abnormalities.



HEALTHY AGING

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Rosanne M. Leipzig, MD, PhD
Editor-in-Chief
Geriatric Medicine



Bernd Schroppe, MD
Medicine (Nephrology)



Bruce J. Darrow, MD
Cardiology

Q I've just started wearing hearing aids and I'm being troubled by ambient noise. Can you recommend any tips for reducing this?

A While hearing aids can help you follow conversations more easily and pick up on many of the sounds you may have been missing due to impaired hearing, they also amplify background noise. This can make it more difficult for you to filter out the sounds you don't want to hear.

Your audiologist will be keen to ensure that you are comfortable wearing your hearing aids, so follow up with him or her. It's possible that some minor adjustments may improve the problem. But keep in mind that it can take time to get used to hearing aids, and initially background noise may seem more intrusive and overwhelming simply because you're now hearing properly for what might be the first time in a long time.

You can help yourself by reducing background noise whenever possible—for example, if you're having a conversation, try to move away from any noise sources, such as televisions and radios, and traffic. If you're eating out, ask to be seated in a quiet corner and have your back to a wall. Try to ensure that whoever you're talking to is well-lit, since we get many of our cues from seeing what someone is saying.

Rosanne M. Leipzig, MD, PhD
Geriatric Medicine

Q I suffer from kidney failure and my doctor has broached the topic of kidney transplant with me. Is this a safe option at my age? I'm 69.

A Previously, older adults often weren't considered for kidney transplant surgery because they had fewer years of life left than younger patients. But this trend is changing, and now age alone doesn't exclude a patient from being approved for a transplant (factors that do include severe heart disease, untreated cancer, severe lung disease, and chronic infections). Even if the patient is age 70 or older, a transplant will double or triple his/her life expectancy compared with dialysis, and will free them from the dialysis schedule, which usually requires three to five hours three days a week at a clinic.

If you decide to follow your doctor's advice, you'll be

evaluated by several healthcare professionals, who will discuss all aspects of your situation and make a collective decision. If there's no living donor, you'll need to factor in the wait time for a kidney—typically an average of four to seven years. However, the wait time can be shorter for older adults, because they may receive kidneys from older donors (called extended-criteria donors, or ECDs). If you decide to go ahead with the surgery and are happy to have an ECD kidney transplanted, be sure to inform your doctor so that this can be noted, as it may speed your treatment.

Bernd Schroppe, MD
Medicine (Nephrology)

Q I have a heart condition and when I told a friend that I would be visiting family in Canada over the holiday season, she said the lower temperatures could worsen my heart health. Is she right?

A Recent research does suggest that when the temperature drops, the risk of heart attack rises. A 2010 study found that a 1.8-degree Fahrenheit drop in temperature in a single 24-hour period is associated with an extra 200 heart attacks daily. A majority of the heart attacks that were reviewed in the study occurred when temperatures reached around 53 degrees Fahrenheit and colder. Adults age 75 and older were at particular risk, as were people who had previously diagnosed heart disease or heart risk factors such as hypertension.

It isn't clear what underpins the association, but narrowing of blood vessels in response to colder temperatures can raise blood pressure, thus raising heart attack risk. It's also possible that cold temperatures increase blood clotting and thickness. The strain of shoveling snow and other outdoor exertion may also play a role. Protect your health during your visit by staying indoors and avoiding strenuous activities when you're outside. Wear layered clothes that will keep you warm, and be sure to wear a hat and gloves or mittens, because heat can escape the body through the extremities.

Bruce J. Darrow, MD
Cardiology

IN COMING ISSUES

Heart Health:
How to manage heart failure

Drug Watch:
All you need to know about your medications

Bereavement
How to cope

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