



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

Volume 4, Number 5
May 2008

Brain Matters

As we age, our risk for many diseases increases. One of the most daunting prospects is to develop a disease that affects the brain, resulting in dementia. Dementia essentially refers to the deterioration and loss of mental functions. While there are many causes of dementia, the most common dementing disorders are Alzheimer's disease and vascular disease. What can a person do to reduce the risk of developing an Alzheimer's or vascular dementia?

One of the best strategies for maintaining brain fitness and health is to focus on the heart. The brain is susceptible to blood flow problems just like the heart. Therefore, what is good for the heart is good for the brain! Many cardiovascular risk factors have indeed been associated with increased risk for Alzheimer's disease. Dementia prevention includes not smoking, avoiding heavy drinking, maintaining a healthy diet and weight, and getting regular exercise. Furthermore, just as blood pressure and cholesterol control are important for heart health, they also contribute to brain health.

Another way to "mind the brain" is to stay in school, at least behaviorally. Persons with more education actually are found to be less susceptible to Alzheimer's disease. However, some of this statistical relationship can be attributed to very intelligent or highly educated people having more cognitive reserve, so that the effects of brain disease don't result in impaired function as quickly. Regardless of the amount of formal education a person has, cognitive exercise is good for the

brain just as physical exercise is good for the body. Mentally stimulating activity seems to help protect against dementia.

Interestingly, people who have a more extensive social network seem to have less risk for dementia. In part, this is likely related to the cognitive stimulation that comes through interaction with other people. Socially active people also tend to behave in healthier ways.

What one believes about aging also appears to affect brain function. Not surprisingly, older adults are inclined to believe they have less control over memory function than do younger adults. However, older adults who perceive greater control over memory tend to have better memory function! Reasons for this include greater use of effective strategies for enhancing memory function, healthier behaviors, less anxiety and depression, and more motivation.

Undeniably there are risk factors for dementia that we cannot control, such as genetic risk. However, many behavioral choices do matter to the brain and affect dementia risk.

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