

# The Record

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## Work brain to keep it sharp

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How can you get a really buff brain? Work it.

"It is absolutely necessary to exercise your brain," says neuroscientist Jennifer Chotiner. "Real estate in your brain is very precious. If something is not being used, the brain figures you don't need it anymore. It's 'use it or lose it.'"

The best brain workout has two daily components: learning and aerobics.

Scientists have long known about the first part. "The brain is like a computer, a learning machine that comes with hardware," says Dr. Gary Kennedy, director of the division of geriatric psychiatry at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. "Education and cognitive stimulation upgrades the software."

Education seems to be the most consistent protective factor against Alzheimer's disease, he adds.

It's only lately that studies have proven how aerobic exercise — even a brisk daily walk — impacts brain fitness by promoting the growth of new brain cells to replace the ones that die off naturally as we age.

"Through aerobics, we can actually increase brain volume in the area that we use for working memory," says Kennedy.

Both the learning and the aerobics should start in childhood. But they're most critical for adults, because even as young as 20, the brain's processing speed is slowing down and paving the way for dementia.

Add memory-boosting techniques to the mix, and you've got powerful weapons against "senior moments" that may strike long before you're eligible for AARP membership.

Reenaa Chawla of the Brain Studio in Mahwah has offered some of her memory "tips, tricks and visualization techniques" from her self-developed Age Smart workshops to seniors in Rutherford and Fair Lawn.

Rising to the challenge Chawla describes her typical client as "40 to 60, well educated, socially forward, with multiple areas of stress in their life that present specific memory challenges."

Aside from simple memory aids (anagrams, abbreviations and associations), she guides clients in game-like challenges to sharpen powers of perception.

"We tend to use fewer of our own learning faculties and more external aids such as computers and timers," Chawla says. "It's high time to come

*In order for the human brain to reach its peak potential, people must engage in physical and mental exercise, scientists say.*

### HABITS FOR A FIT BRAIN

- ▶ Challenge your mind. Learn a foreign language or how to knit or play a musical instrument. Do crossword or jigsaw puzzles. Read a few paragraphs upside down, shop at a new grocery store, use your non-dominant hand for tooth- or hair-brushing,

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