

UW Medicine

My Daily Life

What can I do to be as healthy as I can?

From Mary, living with mild cognitive impairment:

“At one point, my doctor told me, ‘Stay active, and stay social.’

“That’s the best advice I’ve gotten anywhere.”



From Myriam, living with dementia:

“I did all my research when I was first diagnosed.

“Staying socially active is important. Diet is important. Taking your memory meds as directed is important. And exercise is important because it gets the blood flowing up to the brain.”

From Dr. Kimiko Domoto-Reilly, neurologist:

“Staying physically, socially, and mentally active is very important for brain health.”

Healthy habits in your daily life can help with your memory and thinking. They can also help you feel better overall.

In this chapter, you will learn about some of the best things you can do to take charge of your brain health: getting regular exercise, staying socially connected, keeping your mind active, eating well, getting quality sleep, and reducing your stress. You will also find some tips to help you remember better and stay safe.

Key Points in This Chapter

- *Maintain healthy habits to manage your symptoms.*
- *Try to do something physically, socially, and mentally active every day.*
- *Address any safety concerns you may have.*

What can I do to stay as healthy as possible?

Get Regular Exercise

Staying physically active is good for many reasons. Studies suggest that *aerobic activity* (exercise that increases your breathing and heart rates) may help your brain work better. But, any kind of movement that is safe for you is good for your health.

Exercise every day so it becomes one of your habits. Choose something you enjoy doing. Think about doing it with a friend to help you stay motivated.

Stay Socially Connected

Connecting with others has a positive effect on your physical health and your mood. Memory loss can sometimes make you want to be by yourself, but make it a habit to reach out to others. Spend time with people you enjoy, or seek new friends who share your interests.

Keep Your Mind Active

Challenge your mind every day. This could mean learning something new, taking a class, playing games or puzzles, or playing computer games that make you think.

Do something that challenges you, but is not so hard that you get too frustrated. One way to make a simple task harder is to time yourself.

Eat Well



A diet that is good for your heart is also good for your brain. The best diet for protecting your brain is the Mediterranean diet. This diet includes:

- Eating plenty of vegetables, legumes, fruits, whole grains, fish, and olive oil
- Eating less simple sugars, red meat, and dairy

This diet includes 1 or 2 glasses of red wine a day, except for people who have problems with alcohol.

Your healthcare provider can support you in your healthy eating habits. Pick a diet that is right for you, one that will help your other health conditions, and one that you can live with.

Get Good Sleep

Good sleep keeps you healthy, and may help your memory and thinking abilities. Adults need 7 to 8 hours of good sleep every night. If you are having trouble getting the sleep you want and need, talk with your doctor to make sure there isn't anything physical going on. Do these simple things to help improve the quality of your sleep:

- **Create a relaxing nighttime routine.** About 30 minutes before your bedtime, put away work, turn off the computer and TV, and do something that is quiet and helps you relax.
- **Make sure your bedroom helps you relax and sleep.** The room where you sleep should be quiet, cool, and dark. Avoid using TV, computer, and digital book readers in the bedroom. Be aware if pets are making it hard for you to sleep.
- **Go to bed at the same time and get up at the same time every day.** Doing this helps set your inner "sleep clock." If you must nap during the day, try to sleep less than 1 hour and take your nap before 3 p.m. in the afternoon.

Try creating a sleep plan for yourself, stick with it for a month, and then go over your results. Talk with a member of your care team about what you found out. We can help support your sleep strategies. You may still have sleepless nights from time to time, but most people find that these tips make a positive difference.

Reduce Stress

Some stress can be helpful or give you a burst of energy. But ongoing stress can make it harder to remember or think clearly.

Find ways to reduce your stress level. Think about what helps you relax. For some people, it might be listening to music or spending time with animals or children. For others, it might be working on a hobby, going for a walk, working in the garden, meditating or praying, or laughing. See the next page for an example of one type of meditation.

Reducing stress will help with your memory and thinking. It can also just help you feel good!



Kristoffer Rhoads, PhD

UW Voices

Mindfulness Meditation: One Tool for Reducing Stress

By Kristoffer Rhoads, PhD, Neuropsychologist, UW Medicine Memory and Brain Wellness Center

Mindfulness meditation is one tool for reducing stress and living well with memory loss. It involves having a gentle, non-judgmental openness and curiosity about what's going on in the present moment, including its difficulties.

For example, you might notice what it feels like as your breath moves in and out of your nose, how different parts of your body are feeling, or what sounds you hear in the room. As you focus on “now,” your mind can quiet itself, releasing worries about the future or regrets about the past.

Mindfulness helps you accept feelings and situations, instead of avoiding them. It helps you learn to say, “It is what it is.” But acceptance does not mean giving up. Rather, it can be your first action step.

For example, you might not like that it's raining. If you deny that it's raining, you might walk outside and get wet. But if you accept that it's raining, you can take your umbrella when you go out. In the same way, accepting memory loss or dementia does not mean giving up. It means that you know what is going on, and can take active steps to adapt and live well.

Staying focused on the present and practicing acceptance rather than avoidance helps you feel more at peace. It also teaches you how to cope. Meditation is just one way to take care of yourself and build inner strength.

To learn more about mindfulness meditation, visit these websites:

- University of Massachusetts Medical Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society: www.umassmed.edu/cfm
- Mindfulness for Beginners, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD: soundstrue.com/store/mindfulness-for-beginners-4003.html
- Mindfulness Northwest: www.mindfulnessnorthwest.com

Worksheet 4: My Health, My Way

Here are some questions to help you choose a “step to health” for yourself this week. Choose a new step each week, as you build new healthy habits!

This week, one thing I want to do for my health is:

How many times will I do it this week?

What day(s) and time(s) will I do it?

How long will I do it?

Who is one person I will tell about my plan? (Telling another person greatly increases the chances that you’ll reach your goal – plus you’ll have someone to celebrate with when you succeed!).



From Mary, living with mild cognitive impairment:

"A regular routine helps me feel less frustrated with memory loss. I still make mistakes or get embarrassed, but having a predictable schedule for self-care, exercise, and outside activities helps."

What can help me remember better and stay safe in my daily life?

Memory Tips

- Keep a familiar routine and schedule.
- Get a notebook. Write down things that you want to remember. Use only 1 notebook and keep it with you.
- Use only 1 calendar:
 - Add important things to it each night, and review it in the morning and often during the day.
 - Cross off each day before you go to bed each night.
 - Move items forward to the next day if you didn't finish them.
- Start and complete 1 thing at a time.
- Put items like your keys, wallet, and eyeglasses in the same place each time you put them down.
- Work on getting rid of clutter, bit by bit each day:
 - Get rid of things that you don't regularly use or need.
 - If you're not sure, put something in a box with a label.
 - If you haven't used an item in the last month, get rid of it.
- Use a clock and watch that has numbers on the face instead of hands.

Safety Tips

Changes with memory and thinking can bring up some safety concerns. Most people need to find a new balance between independence and safety. In some areas of life, you may be able to do things on your own very well. In other areas, you may need to choose safety over independence.

Your decisions will change over time. Mark dates on your calendar when you will review your decisions about how much you can do on your own.

Here are some common safety concerns and tips for staying safe:

- **Emergency Information.** In case of emergency, you will want to be able to quickly access phone numbers and health information. This information will also need to be handy so that others can read it and help you if needed.
 - Keep a list of important phone numbers in your wallet and posted next to your phone.
 - It is a good idea to wear an ID bracelet that includes your name, emergency contact numbers, and health conditions.
- **Kitchen Safety.** One common safety concern is leaving the stove or other appliances on. Here are some tips:
 - When cooking, use a timer with an alarm that you need to turn off when it rings, instead of one that turns off by itself. This way, you will have to go to the stove to make sure burners are turned off.
 - Think about getting an electric kettle and coffee maker that turn off by themselves. This lessens the risk of leaving them on for a long time.
- **Medicine Safety.** Memory loss can make it harder to recall if you've taken your medicine, or when to take it. Taking too much or not enough medicine can be very harmful. Monitor your medicines so that you take the right amounts at the right times.
 - Use a pill box (*mediset*) to organize your medicines. Some have alarms to remind you it's time to take your medicines.

- **Driving Safety.** Safe driving includes making many decisions, both for your own safety and for the safety of others. Your ability to drive can be affected by changes in your memory or thinking. You may find that it is harder to react to unusual events, make quick decisions, or find your way around. Here are some tips for safe driving:
 - Put away your cell phone while driving.
 - Try using systems like a GPS to help you find your way around.
 - Have someone regularly assess your driving. Ask a friend or family member to drive with you and tell you if they see safety concerns. If there are concerns, ask yourself this question:

When should I consider retiring from driving?

For your own safety and the safety of others, it is important to think about what would cause you to retire from driving. Some people choose to retire from driving soon after their diagnosis. Others ask a loved one to help them assess their driving skills over time.

The choice to retire from driving is often a hard one. The best approach is to begin trying out other ways to get around soon after your diagnosis. This gives you time to become familiar with them before you need to retire from driving.

- To find an occupational therapist who can assess your driving skills, visit myaota.aota.org/driver_search/index.aspx.
- Read “At the Crossroads: Family Conversations about Alzheimer’s Disease, Dementia & Driving” by The Hartford Foundation. Find the free guide online at <http://hartfordauto.thehartford.com/UI/Downloads/Crossroads.pdf>.
- If you have retired from driving, find resources on getting around in chapter 9, “My Community.”

What if I live by myself?

If you live alone, all of these daily life strategies are even more important. It is also vital that you build a good support system:

- Reach out to people you trust, who understand what you are going through. Ask if you can call on them if needed.
- Get involved in community activities or support groups.
- Think about where you live. Would it be a good idea to move into an apartment building or condo where people are close by?
- Think about what you'd like to do if it becomes a challenge to live on your own. You will be able to relax and enjoy life more once you know your options and preferences for the future.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Talk with your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

- To learn more about the Memory and Brain Wellness Center, visit depts.washington.edu/mbwc
- To set up clinic visit, call 206.520.5000.