



Mental Fitness

New research suggests that exercise can help prevent cognitive decline

Besides keeping your body fit, moderate physical activity can also help to keep your mind sharp as you get older. That's the key finding of a recent study on exercise and cognitive function published last month in the *Archives of Neurology*.

Scientists at the world-renowned Mayo Clinic tested 1,324 older adults for mild cognitive impairment, a precursor to dementia. Those who reported moderate physical activity in midlife -- such as brisk walking, aerobics, yoga, strength training, and swimming -- were 39 percent less likely to experience a decline in thinking, learning, and memory skills as they aged.

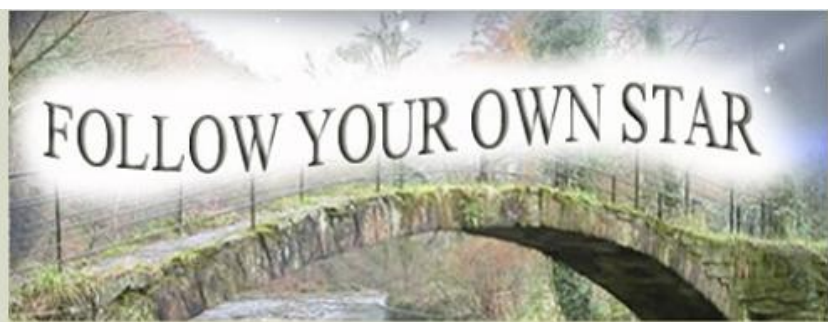
The researchers theorize that physical activity may help defend against mild cognitive impairment by producing nerve-protecting compounds, increasing blood flow to the brain, boosting the development of neurons, and reducing the risk of heart and blood vessel diseases.

“A second possibility is that physical exercise may be a marker for a healthy lifestyle,” they note. “A subject who engages in regular physical exercise may also show the same type of discipline in dietary habits, accident prevention, adherence to preventive intervention, compliance with medical care, and similar health-promoting behaviors.”

Earlier studies conducted on animal and human subjects also concluded that exercise can improve cognitive function. The authors of the latest study want further research to help pinpoint the exact relationship between physical activity and the brain.



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