

Three things to do now for a healthy noggin

Angie Ferguson
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As life expectancy continues to rise, quality of life in our later years is becoming increasingly important. Therefore, keeping our minds, as well as our bodies, healthy is a priority. Here are three strategies you can start today to keep your brain sharp.

- **Exercise your brain.** Like the body, the brain benefits from being used, challenged and kept in shape. Challenging the brain with new activities can create new pathways that can act as alternate routes if some neurons (nerve cells) are damaged. Things to do include playing games that involve planning and memory such as chess and bridge; trying activities that test your vocabulary such as crosswords and Scrabble; learning a new skill – perhaps a language or a musical instrument and doing sums in your head rather than automatically reaching for a calculator.

- **Keep physically active.** Research has shown that physical activity can protect against loss of mental function. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain and may promote neuron growth. You don't have to run a marathon to be active. You simply need to increase the level of physical activity in your daily life. Examples include taking the stairs rather than the elevator and parking your car further away than you would normally so you can walk the extra distance. If you have a dog, take it for longer and more regular walks – your dog will



If you have a dog, take it for longer and more regular walks. Your dog will appreciate it, too. GETTY IMAGES

thank you, too. Ride a stationary exercise bike while watching TV or take up a hobby that keeps you physically active, such as gardening. If you are already doing more vigorous activities like cycling,

make sure you wear a helmet, as head injuries are an important risk factor for memory problems.

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Like your body, your brain thrives on a well-balanced

diet. A healthy diet can go a long way toward preventing conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure that may impair your mental function. Try to keep your weight under control, bearing in mind that energy requirements generally fall after the age of 70, and aim to include the following nutrients in your diet:

- **Protein.** This is essential for supplying your brain with amino acids (protein building blocks). Good sources of protein include fish, poultry, lean meats, legumes and nuts.

- **The right type of fats.** This means unsaturated fats – from oily fish, nuts, and oils such as sunflower oil and olive oil – rather than saturated fats – those in meats, dairy and products such as biscuits, cakes and pies. Unsaturated fats are an important constituent of neuron membranes.

- **Carbohydrates.** Carbohydrates supply glucose, a form of sugar and the fuel that neurons need to function. The brain can only store a finite amount of glucose; therefore, it must receive a steady supply from the bloodstream. This is one of the reasons we've always heard that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. What you eat for breakfast fuels your brain for the day.

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Doc's life of service spans from military to private sector

Tim Walters
Florida Today
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Q: Why do you go into this career?

A: I enjoy figuring out problems. An important part of my practice is the interview. I listen to you tell me your story. Then, I'll give you an opinion with the goal of making you better. Sometimes things are straightforward, sometimes it takes a few tests – labs or X-rays or the help of another consultant. But ultimately, the whole point is to make your life better. I enjoy it. I've always enjoyed science, too, so this was the natural direction for me.

Q: What services do you provide?

A: I treat adults. As an internal medicine physician, I offer my patients wellness exams and preventative care. I diagnose and manage such chronic conditions as diabetes, hypertension and high blood pressure. Then there are short-term illnesses, such as upper respiratory infections, UTIs and the flu – I treat those as well. My role is the overall management of a patient's medical issues. Depending on the diagnosis, I treat patients myself or refer them to specialists as needed.

Q: What makes this area of medicine fulfilling for you?

A: Internal medicine is consistent with my personality type. I get to use my listening abilities during patient interviews. An interview should be a conversation, not an interrogation. You have a chance to tell me your story, and ultimately,



Dr. Ethan Alan Webb specializes in Internal Medicine for Rockledge Regional Medical Center.
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mately, that's what it's all about. I listen to your life story and I make a decision on what needs to be done. Every single day is a new story.

Q: When did you realize this was the right medical career path for you?

A: I wanted to be a physician since grade school. In junior high, when we first had life sciences, I found this area of interest to be fascinating.

Q: What's the latest advancement in your field that will benefit patients?

A: Medications have come a long way

Get to Know Your Health Pro

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Education: I attended Louisiana State University-Shreveport, where I earned an undergraduate degree in biology and LSU Health Science Center-Shreveport for a Doctor of Medicine degree. I performed my residency in Internal Medicine at Keesler Medical Center at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi.

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over the years. There are a lot of new medications on the market that allow us to treat certain disease processes, for example rheumatoid arthritis. In times gone by, the medications we used were sometimes more harmful than helpful. However, now we have more specific medication with better outcomes and fewer side effects.

Q: Best advice for current and potential patients?

A: Receive regular medical care so we can identify issues in their earliest state. Screening exams are important, such as: mammograms, colonoscopies

and pap smears. Those tests allow us to pick up on cancers and other abnormalities. Also, screening labs are important to determine whether you have such conditions as diabetes. Catching them early will increase the recovery or your longevity rate. Tobacco cessation – that's a big one. It's one of the most rewarding things when a patient – someone I've told 10 times in 10 visits to quit smoking – finally decides to do it.

Have a suggestion for FLORIDA TODAY's Know Your Health Pro feature? Contact Tim Walters at twalters@floridatoday.com

Study weighs the health benefits of coffee

Amy Norton
HEALTHDAY NEWS

Coffee has been tied to many potential health benefits, but people should drink it for pleasure, and not disease prevention.

That's one of the main conclusions of a new research review. In it, researchers give an overview of the evidence on coffee and caffeine – the subjects of many health studies over the years.

"The impact of coffee consumption on health is important because there are few other dietary factors that so many people across the world are so frequently exposed to," said Rob van Dam, the lead author on the review.

And overall, his team found, the news is good for coffee lovers: Caffeinated coffee does not appear to raise any disease risks, and is instead linked to lower odds of various diseases. And moderate doses of caffeine are generally safe for most people.

"Moderate" is the key, however. Too much caffeine can disrupt sleep or make people jittery.

"The amount of caffeine that leads to

unpleasant side effects varies greatly from person to person," said van Dam, a professor at the National University of Singapore.

He suggested people pay attention to whether caffeine seems to affect their ability to fall asleep or lead to "agitation or anxiety." If it does, van Dam said, "they can adapt their level of intake or timing of intake during the day."

That's the advice for most adults. Pregnant women, however, should be particularly careful about caffeine intake. Based on the evidence, van Dam's team said, they should limit themselves to no more than 200 milligrams of caffeine a day.

That's roughly the amount in 12 ounces of coffee.

For nonpregnant people, van Dam said that up to five 8-ounce cups of coffee a day may be fine, depending on a person's caffeine tolerance.

Lauri Wright is chair of nutrition and dietetics at the University of North Florida, and a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

"There's been so much back-and-forth over the years about whether caf-

feine is good or bad," said Wright, who was not involved in the review. "So it's good to come back to the evidence."

In general, studies show that despite caffeine's bad reputation as a stimulant, caffeinated coffee does not seem to raise the risk of developing high blood pressure – or worsen existing blood pressure problems.

In fact, coffee consumption has been linked to lower risks of developing heart disease, as well as other serious conditions. The list includes type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, Parkinson's disease, liver disease and gallstones, according to the review.

None of those studies, however, prove that coffee – or caffeine – are responsible for the lower risks, Wright said. She agreed with the report's conclusion that people should not rely on java to prevent any diseases.

"But coffee and caffeine can be part of a healthy lifestyle," Wright said.

There is a question over whether filtered coffee (from a drip coffee maker, for instance) is healthier than unfiltered. The latter includes espresso, boiled coffee and coffee made by French

press, for example.

According to van Dam, research shows that unfiltered coffee can raise blood cholesterol levels.

Wright, however, said "what you put into the coffee is what really matters, rather than whether it's filtered or unfiltered." That is, avoid loading that coffee cup with sugar and cream.

"Some of these coffee drinks people buy are more like milk shakes," Wright said.

There are other sources of dietary caffeine, including tea, sodas and chocolate. For the most part, though, they contain low amounts, Wright said.

Two exceptions, she noted, are energy drinks and "shots," which can contain as much or more caffeine than a cup of coffee. High intake of those beverages can cause spikes in blood pressure and heart palpitations, according to the review.

Caffeine can also interact with certain medications. If people have questions about their medications, Wright said, they can talk to their pharmacist.

The review was published July 23 in the New England Journal of Medicine.