

# Dr. Andrew Weil's Self Healing

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## Ten Steps to Better Memory

It's a scenario I often encounter: A person in her late forties or fifties comes in for a consultation. She tells me she's having to use the word *thingamajig* a lot in her conversations, or has found herself more than once in the supermarket aisle without a clue as to what her husband asked her to pick up. She's panicked that these occasional lapses are harbingers of early senility.

In an age when Alzheimer's disease gets so much publicity, such anxieties are common and understandable. But in my experience--as I'm quick to reassure my worried patients--most people who fear that their memory is "going" are more likely suffering from stress or a simple lack of attention. It's true that our brains shrink a little as we grow older, and many people do notice some short-term memory loss by middle age. But recent findings on the aging brain have been extremely encouraging: In a ground-breaking study that made headlines last November, scientists showed for the first time that adults as old as their seventies continue to grow new brain cells (neurons) in the hippocampus, a part of the brain important to learning and memory. Other research is pointing to the value of everything from exercise to nutrients to mind games in sustaining mental fitness.

Now I'd like to share with you the latest news on natural ways to keep your memory strong and your mind sharp at any age. (Obviously, anyone suffering from *progressive* memory loss or memory loss associated with behavior changes should be sure to check with his or her doctor.) I will also discuss the merits of one "shortcut" my patients often ask me about: herbs and other supplements marketed as brain boosters.

**1. Give your mind a workout.** A growing body of research suggests that people who take on intellectual challenges throughout life may be able to compensate for the biological changes caused by aging in the brain: In one 1995 study of 72 professors at the University of California at Berkeley, the over-60 subjects held their own against younger ones at tasks involving mental planning, organization, and problem solving--functions that often deteriorate with age. My own memory continues to serve me well, and I suspect that this is largely because I use it often, whether calling up information during seminars or doing games for fun.

Many experts believe that *any* mentally challenging activity enables nerve cells to develop new branches (dendrites) and aids in building the synapses between neurons that allow messages to flow. To help keep your memory sharp, I suggest turning off the TV and making a habit of reading, playing chess, doing word puzzles, learning new skills, or just engaging in stimulating conversation.

**2. Take antioxidants.** The brain consumes more oxygen than any other body tissue, exposing it to a great number of free radicals, which can damage cell membranes and prevent neurons from functioning properly. (Just last month, University of Pennsylvania researchers found that the brains of people with Alzheimer's show twice as much free-radical activity as normal ones.) The good news? Mounting evidence suggests that antioxidants can help ward off this damage and keep the brain functioning at its peak. One Swiss study of 442 elderly subjects in the 1997 *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* found that those with the highest levels of vitamin C and beta-carotene in their blood did best on tests of free recall, recognition, and vocabulary. In November, the same journal reported an Austrian study of 1,800 middle-aged and elderly people that showed a positive link between scores on cognitive tests and blood levels of vitamin E.

If you're concerned about mental fitness, I strongly advise following my antioxidant cocktail: 100 to 250 mg of vitamin C and 25,000 IU of mixed carotenes at breakfast, 400 to 800 IU of natural vitamin E and 200 mcg of selenium at lunch, and 100 to 250 mg of vitamin C at dinner.

**3. Supplement with B vitamins.** These vitamins, whose cardioprotective effects are being documented in more and more studies, are also vital to cognitive functioning. A Tufts University study of middle-aged and older men in the 1996 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found a link between higher blood levels of vitamin B-6 and better scores on memory tests, while low levels of vitamins B-12 and folate were associated with weaker spatial skills. To ensure a sufficient intake of B vitamins (vitamin B-12 in particular can be difficult to absorb from food), I now advise everyone to take a B-100 B-complex supplement (containing 400 mcg of folic acid) as part of their daily regime.

**4. Lower the pressure.** High blood pressure, which injures the small blood vessels in the brain, is a leading cause of cognitive impairment in older people. One landmark study of some 3,800 Japanese-American men in the 1995 *Journal of the American Medical Association* found an alarming connection: The higher the middle-aged subjects' systolic blood pressure (the first number in the reading) had been back in the 1960s, the poorer their mental abilities were three decades down the road. Left untreated, high blood pressure can also lead to the mini strokes that are a common cause of dementia in later life.

To keep your blood pressure in check, be sure to have it monitored regularly. If yours is consistently above 140 systolic or 90 diastolic, I advise you to follow lifestyle measures to lower it, such as reducing salt intake, exercising regularly, shedding excess pounds, and eating potassium-rich foods. (For more tips, see "Take Control of High Blood Pressure" in the March 2000 issue.) Such measures may also allow those already on blood-pressure drugs to reduce their dosage. Be aware, however, that certain anti-hypertensive drugs can actually cause short-term memory problems, so talk with your doctor if you think your medication may be influencing your memory.

**5. Check your meds.** Besides blood-pressure drugs, other medications that can affect short-term memory include antihistamines, anti-anxiety medications (such as Xanax and Valium), and narcotics. In addition, medications that may not cause mental impairment by themselves can sometimes do so when taken together, as is the case with many older people on a multi-drug regime. If you suspect that drugs may be affecting your memory, draw up a list of everything you're taking (including OTC meds and alcohol) and discuss the issue with your physician or pharmacist.

**6. Load up on brain food.** The belief that fish is "brain food" may have some truth to it after all. DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), one of the heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids found in oily cold-water fish, is necessary for optimal brain development in infants, and recent findings suggest a correlation between low levels of DHA and impaired cognitive function. Studies to determine whether DHA supplementation can improve short-term memory and concentration are currently under way. While research continues, I encourage everyone to boost their intake of omega-3s: Aim to eat salmon, sardines, mackerel, or herring a few times a week, or sprinkle a tablespoon of ground flaxseed on your cereal, soup, or salad every day. (See "Brain Power in a Bottle?" above, for information on DHA supplements.)

**7. Keep moving.** Experts believe that even moderate exercise stimulates blood flow to the brain as well as nerve growth, resulting in neurons that are more densely branched. One 1997 study of 187 older women published in the *Australia-New Zealand Journal of Public Health* found that those who took part in a 12-month group exercise program scored significantly better than the control group on measures including memory span and reaction time. If you don't already have a regular exercise routine, my standard recommendation for taking a brisk,

45-minute walk at least five days a week will go a long way toward keeping your brain in shape.

**8. Don't skimp on sleep.** People who chronically get less sleep than they need may be accumulating sleep debt, a condition that interferes with mental functioning (as any parent of a newborn can tell you). Even the REM sleep you get *after* you learn a new task is vital to the long-term storage of that memory, research shows. If you're having trouble sleeping, consider such strategies as soaking in a hot bath before bedtime or taking calcium-magnesium supplements at night. (For more tips, see "Getting a Good Night's Sleep" in the September 1998 issue.)

**9. De-stress.** Anyone who has ever experienced performance anxiety when taking a test or speaking in public can vouch for the power of stress to make you "forget" what you know. Over the long term, persistent stress has effects that are even more disturbing: New research shows that sustained elevation of the stress hormone cortisol can actually damage brain cells in the hippocampus. In one small study published last May in *Nature Neuroscience*, a team of Canadian researchers found that older adults with high levels of cortisol in their blood scored significantly worse on a short-term memory test--and had hippocampi that were 14 percent smaller, as measured by MRI scans--than subjects who had lower levels of the hormone.

To alleviate stress, I encourage you to find a form of relaxation--such as yoga, meditation, or breathwork--that you like and to stick with it, making it an integral part of your daily routine.

**10. Pay attention.** To my mind, the real secret of memory is attention: The steps I have outlined above won't help you remember if you don't pay attention to what's going by. And the secret of attention is motivation. When you truly want to remember something, drop whatever else you're doing and focus on it. If you're tired of forgetting people's names, force yourself to listen when you're being introduced or try an old salesman's trick: Repeat the person's name several times in conversation. If you're sick of losing your glasses, make a point of always keeping them in the same place. Stay organized by writing things down, using datebooks and lists and consulting them frequently. I do this myself, and I find that it helps me a lot--as long as I remember where I put the list.

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