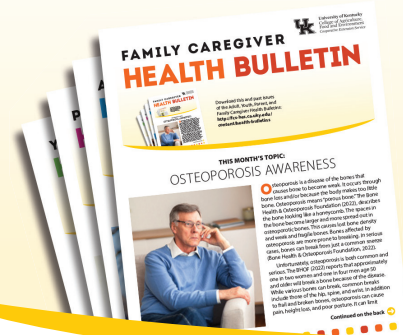


FAMILY CAREGIVER

HEALTH BULLETIN



APRIL 2024

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC

SUPPORTING BRAIN HEALTH



If you are a caregiver for someone with Alzheimer's disease, you are not alone. According to the Alzheimer's Association, more than 157,000 family caregivers provide an estimated 302 million hours of unpaid care to help preserve the health, safety, and dignity of more than 75,000 older adults living with the condition. Alzheimer's disease gets worse over time because of a build-up of plaques and tangles of proteins in the brain. Over time, these plaques and tangles destroy the healthy connections between nerve cells in the brain and the ability for the cells to properly function, thereby impacting memory, thinking, and other cognitive abilities. Eventually, a person with Alzheimer's disease may not be able to carry out activities of daily living. As a result, dementia caregiving can be stressful, expensive, and overwhelming. Many caregivers face limited resources and lack of training. Here's how caregivers can support brain connection through everyday engagement.

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Social activity is critical for cognitive stimulation. Plan a cookout, play a game, visit with your loved ones.

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The brain has billions of nerve cells, called neurons, that process and transmit information. According to the National Institutes of Health (2024), these cells communicate with different parts of the brain and the rest of the body to function. Alzheimer's disease disrupts a neuron's ability to communicate to its neighboring cells. When neurons stop communicating properly, they die. To stay healthy, the NIH explains that neurons need constant communication with their neighboring cells, and they need proper energy in the form of oxygen and nutrients, which is supplied by the blood. A neuron's survival is also based on its ability to maintain, repair, and remodel itself. This means that the adult brain has the ability to generate new neurons and build new connections, a process called neurogenesis, depending on how much or little stimulation it is receiving from other cells.

As a caregiver, you can help protect both your brain and the brain of someone to whom you provide care. Here are some ways that you can promote brain health and support brain connections through everyday engagement:

- **Sensory stimulation:** Neurons are more likely to repair and produce neurogenesis in an enriching environment that includes sensory stimulation. Environments should include a variety of textures, sounds, smells, and tastes. Consider planting a garden, swinging on a porch swing, feeding the ducks, or playing music.
- **Physical exercise:** Combine physical activity with fresh air and sunshine to elevate the senses. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends 150 minutes of exercise per week. Think about ways you can move more and sit less. You could dance in your kitchen, rock in a rocking chair, wash the car, skip rocks, or window shop.
- **Social engagement:** Interact with people. Talk, sing, touch, and watch people. Take drives with the windows down. Play with children and pets. Social activity is critical for cognitive stimulation. Plan a cookout, play a game, visit with your loved ones.

- **Cognitive challenges:** Stimulate thinking by staying engaged and participating in activities. Challenge your brain just enough to make it hard, but not so hard you feel frustrated.
- **Eat healthy:** Diets good for your heart are also good for your brain. Heart-healthy diets include Mediterranean foods, low sodium, whole grains, healthy fats, and lean meats and fish.
- **Sleep:** Good sleep helps restore and cleanse the brain of toxins. You should get 7 to 9 hours a night.

Research study

For information on a voluntary University of Kentucky research study for caregivers of adults with memory loss and dementia living at home in Kentucky that include these points on brain health, scan the QR code or visit:

<https://www.ccts.uky.edu/participate-research/current-studies/are-you-caring-someone-dementia-0>



SOURCES:

- Elizabeth Rhodus, PhD, University of Kentucky Sander Brown Center on Aging
- Amy F. Kostelic, PhD., associate Extension professor for adult development and aging

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