

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Mind tricks

Do puzzles, brain games really keep older minds sharp?

By Allison Ward  
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Many older adults enjoy “brain games” such as crosswords, sudoku and computer brain-training games. But can they help improve memory? Well, it’s complicated.

Sudoku, crossword puzzles and other brain teasers can bring relaxation at the end of a long day or jump-start the morning over a cup of coffee.

Some people might also use the games to keep their minds sharp as they get older, though the verdict is mixed on whether games have long-term brain benefits.

Aging experts explain that there’s absolutely no harm in doing puzzles (jigsaw included) or other so-called brain games. Though the games stimulate the brain in important ways, there are other more beneficial and scientifically proved ways to improve brain health, such as physical activity, nutrition and social engagement, they say.

“I wouldn’t tell anyone, ‘Don’t do sudoku. Don’t do brain games,’” said Scott Hayes, a clinical psychologist and director of the Buckeye Brain Aging Lab at Ohio State University. “It’s better than watching mindless TV for hours. It’s just sometimes this stuff is marketed in a way that it provides huge benefits when, scientifically, that has not been supported to date.”

He said this is particularly the case with apps, such as Lumosity, that tout unfounded claims to protect against cognitive decline. (Lumosity agreed to pay \$2 million to settle a deceptive advertising charge with the Federal Trade Commission in 2016.)

The Global Council on Brain Health, in conjunction with AARP, found in 2017 that the evidence for long-term health benefits of brain games is weak.

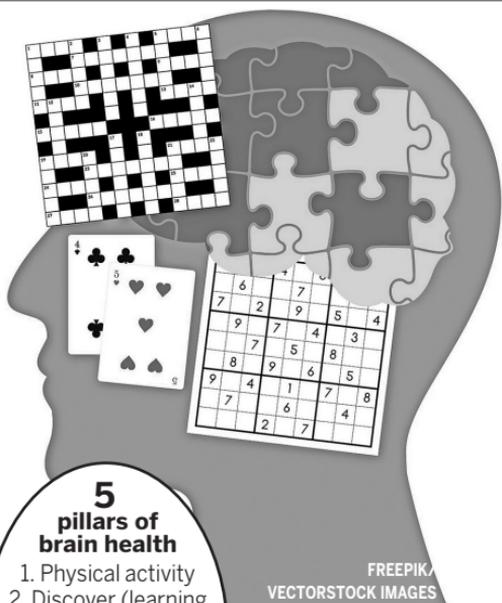
Still, another study, published in the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry last year, looked at 19,100 people and found that the more people engaged with word and number puzzles, the better they did on attention, memory and reasoning tests.

However, the research did not study whether these activities might prevent cognitive decline.

Keeping the mind sharp is the top area of concern for AARP members, said spokeswoman Michelle Shirer, citing surveys the organization conducts.

“The entire country, it’s a global issue we are all concerned about,” said Shirer. “All of us are aging and we want to be the best we can for as long as we can.” AARP has identified five pillars of brain health: physical activity, discovery (learning a new skill), relaxation (getting enough sleep included), nutrition and social interaction.

Shirer said that one major brain myth is that people are born with all their neurons. In fact, areas of the brain do grow, and people can influence those changes as they age.



### 5 pillars of brain health

1. Physical activity
2. Discover (learning a skill)
3. Relaxation (including getting enough sleep)
4. Nutrition
5. Social interaction

Source: AARP

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However, that takes engaging in activities that are “novel, highly engaging, mentally challenging and enjoyable.”

Though enrolling in a Spanish class or picking up the guitar certainly fit that bill, Shirer explained that “stimulating” activities can be as easy as playing a new game with grandchildren or learning a new technology.

“That adage of ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ is not true,” Shirer said.

And a good physical workout just might be the best brain exercise, said Hayes, whose research focuses on the variables that can slow age-related cognitive decline.

“People ask, ‘I’ve got an hour, 30 minutes, 15 minutes, what can I do?’” Hayes said. “I recommend a physical fitness activity over cognitive exercises.”

However, he said some brain training can be an effective tool for working on certain tasks, such as remembering people’s faces and names.

People can get better at that, but it doesn’t necessarily translate to other areas, like remembering a grocery list, Hayes said.

Learning Rx, a brain-training center in Dublin, Ohio, provides one-on-one sessions for people wanting to improve their cognitive skills, said David O’Reilly, owner of the local franchise that has 167 facilities worldwide. Clients range from children with learning disabilities to patients who have suffered strokes to older adults hoping to slow decline.

“They want to continue to sharpen their memory,” said O’Reilly, who opened his center six years ago after his family struggled to find cognitive help for his mother. “Maybe they’re not keeping up with the pace of the workplace when it comes to memory, processing and speed. A number of people want to continue to sharpen their reading skills.”

People need to work out their brains just like their bodies, O’Reilly added.

“Game nights, cards, doing sudoku, continue reading — anything that is getting your mind active and engaged,” O’Reilly said.

Shirer said people should be proactive. “It’s encouraging for people to take this on and own it,” she said. “They can be actionable.”

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