Preventative Wellness for Older Adults: A 3 Step Action Plan

By Judson Retirement Services

As we age our lives naturally tend to become less active, both physically and mentally. Most of us have retired, kids out of the house, and we're left with our own self-motivation to pursue interests and hobbies.

With this decrease in activity, we tend to take it as the natural course that our bodies break down, potentially along with our minds, and we start having health issues and chronic pain. From osteoporosis to heart disease to dementia - we simply assume certain developments to be part of the natural aging process.

But we have some good news to get 2016 started on the right track.

By engaging in some simple preventative wellness practices, whose results are backed by hundreds of scientific studies, we can mitigate and sometimes altogether eliminate many of these symptoms of aging.

All we have to do is get three primary facets of our lives in order: our nutrition, our level of physical activity, and our degree of social connection and inclusiveness.

New Year's Action Plan - Step 1: Regulate Nutrition

Perhaps nothing is more important as we get older than our nutrition. We're well aware of nutrition's effect on our physiological health (even if we're unaware of the specifics), but it's lesser known in public circles the impact nutrition has on brain function.

But in the ever-changing field of health and nutrition (what happened to the food pyramid?), how do we know what's healthy and what is not? How do we know what foods to avoid, what foods to consume, and in what ratios? Let us to turn, then, to science.

Are Grains Truly Great?

Dr. David Perlmutter, neurologist and author of multiple best-selling books in the emerging field of nutritional psychology, has some pretty poignant advice. In an age where it's well-documented that we as Americans are, year by year, gaining more weight, experiencing more chronic pain, and dying more and more from conditions associated with severe cognitive impairments, Dr. Perlmutter has one simple recommendation: avoid gluten. As a matter of fact, he recommends avoiding nearly all grains altogether.

Dr. Perlmutter notes that consuming grains, even so-called healthy grains, directly correlates with brain disorders like dementia, anxiety, chronic headaches, depression, and much more. In his practice and throughout myriad clinical studies, he and fellow researchers consistently found

that removing carbohydrates from the diet, specifically those that contain gluten, helped people ameliorate, if not altogether eliminate, myriad health problems, like increased risks of diabetes, depression, insomnia, intestinal problems including celiac disease and irritable bowel, memory problems, and much, much more.

Instead, Dr. Perlmutter, and an ever-increasing number of well-documented studies, recommend shifting to a diet low in carbohydrates and high in healthy, saturated fats. Recommended diets include an abundance of vegetables, fish, meat, poultry, nuts, eggs and salads.

Nutrition's impact on the brain cannot be overstated, and definitely cannot be covered in one section of one blog post. Simply Google "nutritional psychology" and you'll discover for yourself all of the research and scientifically backed articles discussing these very same concepts (and coming to the very same conclusions).

New Year's Resolution 1: Resolve to eat healthier by reducing overall grain intake and increasing saturated fat in your diet.

New Year's Action Plan - Step 2: Increase Movement

Increased levels of movement and exercise has dual benefits many may not realize:

1. Improves physical health, preventing injury, reducing the likelihood of slips and falls, increasing energy, and maintaining healthy bones and joints.
2. Prevents cognitive decline and decreases risk of cognitive impairment as we age.

While the first reason may seem obvious to most, many of us are unfamiliar with exercise's impact on one of our most vital organs: the brain.

A study conducted at the University of Illinois clearly showed how modest but regular aerobic exercise can improve our overall cognitive health. Older adults who participated in the study took 40-minute walks three days per week over the course of one year.

In that year alone, the participants saw a two-percent increase in the size of their hippocampus, the area of the brain involved in memory and learning. In contrast, without exercise, older adults can expect to see a decrease in the size of their hippocampus by about one or two percent each year.

Exercise spurs the generation of new brain cells - this is now well-documented fact. But how much exercise do we need? Not as much as you might think.

The Rush Memory and Aging Project, conducted in 2012 in Chicago with more than 1,200 elders participating, clearly demonstrated that, as Dr. Perlmutter references in his book *Grain Brain*, ". . . we cannot underestimate the power of low-cost, easily accessible, and side-effect-free activities that may not entail formal exercise. The mere actions of daily living can provide brain-protective benefits at any age."

New Year's Resolution 2: Resolve to engage in 15 minutes of physical activity each day, or 30 minutes of physical activity three times a week. From swimming to walking to daily activities like gardening and maintaining your home - anything that gets you moving and elevates the heart rate can elevate your brain function and stave off cognitive decline.

New Year's Action Plan - Step 3: Increase Social Connectivity

As we age we might struggle to get out and about like we used to because of challenging transportation issues or decreased energy. It's easy to feel isolated from activities we once enjoyed. But if we can fix the initial problem of transportation and mobility through exercise and nutrition, as we discussed above, we can move on to focus on the importance of social connectivity. And like nutrition and exercise's impact on the brain, in recent decades science has come a long way in understanding social connectivity's impact on our overall health.

To get right into the meat of it, a University of Chicago study found that extreme loneliness increases a person's chance of premature death by 14%. An article in Psychology Today, citing this study, went on to say:

> "The health consequences of feeling lonely are dramatic. The researchers found that feeling isolated from others can: disrupt sleep, elevate blood pressure, increase morning rises in the stress hormone cortisol, alter gene expression in immune cells, increase depression, and lower overall subjective well-being."

If that's not enough to get you entrenched in social circles, increased social connectivity has the added benefit of increasing our cognitive function (i.e. our brain power). Supporting this we turn once again to the Rush Memory and Aging Project: It showed that increased cognitive activity in older adults slowed their decline in cognitive function and decreased their risk of mild cognitive impairment.

The study showed that **cognitively active seniors, whose average age was 80, were 2.6 times less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and dementia than seniors with less cognitive activity.**

New Year's Resolution 3: Resolve to try and actively engage at least one new person each month. Or re-connect with someone with whom you've lost touch. Modern technology and social networks makes this resolution that much more achievable.

If you're not one for New Year's resolutions, worry not. Even implementing mild, incremental change over time will have compounding benefits years down the road.

So from all of us at Judson, Happy New Year!

Wishing you the best in 2016.

Please note that this blog post is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians. Readers should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

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