

50 Ways to Boost Your Noodle

Want to keep your brain in shape? Work it

By: Heather Boerner | Source: AARP.org

One of the best ways to stay sharp is to exercise that muscle between your ears, research indicates. And discussions with some of the top scientists studying the brain reveal that you can work your noggin in many different ways, every day.

Here are 50 of them:

1. **Snack on almonds and blueberries instead of a candy bar.** As they lower blood sugar, healthy snacks can improve cognition. In this case, the omega-3s in the almonds and the antioxidants in the blueberries can keep your brain functioning correctly.
2. **Ballroom dance like the stars.** Dancing is a brain-power activity. How so? Learning new moves activates brain motor centers that form new neural connections. Dancing also calms the brain's stress response.
3. **Love the crunch of croutons on your salad?** Try walnuts instead. Omega-3s in walnuts have been found to improve mood and calm inflammation that may lead to brain-cell death. They also replace lost melatonin, which is necessary for healthy brain functioning.
4. **Take your dog—or yourself—for a walk.** Walking for just 20 minutes a day can lower blood sugar. That helps stoke blood flow to the brain, so you think more clearly.
5. **Add Chinese club moss to your daily vitamin regimen.** Taking less than 100 micrograms of the herb daily may protect your brain's neurotransmitters and keep synapses firing correctly, tests suggest. But this herb is powerful, so check with your doctor for drug interactions.
6. **Volunteer to answer questions at the library, arboretum, museum, or hospital.** Playing tour guide forces you to learn new facts and think on your feet, helping to form new neural pathways in your brain. What's more, interacting with others can ease stress that depletes memory.
7. **Grab a video-game joystick.** New video games, such as the Wii and Nintendo DS, offer brain teasers that make you learn the computer's interface as you master the brain games. That's a double boost to the formation of new neural connections and to response time and memory.
8. **Leave your comfort zone.** Getting good at sudoku? Time to move on. Brain teasers don't form new neural connections once you've mastered them. So try something that's opposite your natural skills: If you like numbers, learn to draw. If you love language, try logic puzzles.
9. **Get support for stressors.** You may love your ailing family member, but the chronic stress of facing the situation alone can shrink your brain's memory center. Interacting with others activates many parts of the brain—and learning new ways of coping forms new neural connections.
10. **When you look around, really look.** Stare straight ahead, and now—without moving your eyes—see if you can make out what's at the periphery. Do this regularly and you'll stimulate the neural and spatial centers of the brain, which can atrophy as you age.
11. **When you look forward, also look around.** Walking down the street, don't just keep your eyes forward. Scan to the left and to the right. These actions can activate rarely used parts of the brain. That in turn can spur brain cell growth and new neural connections.
12. **Show, don't tell.** When you woke up this morning, how bright was the light in your room? What did the air smell like when you opened the window? How many colors could you discern in your garden? Notice and report these details to others to prompt cell growth in the visual, verbal, and memory parts of the brain.
13. **Listen for details when a friend tells a story.** Heed changes in the person's tone and register small facts you might otherwise gloss over. Conjure a mental image of the story. By doing this, you activate multiple areas in the brain and encourage memory formation.
14. **Drink two cups of gotu kola tea daily.** This ayurvedic herb, used for centuries in India, regulates dopamine. That's the brain chemical that helps protect

brain cells from harmful free radicals, boosts pleasurable feelings, and improves focus and memory.

15. **Try some new tea.** Tulsi tea, made of an Indian herb called holy basil, and ginseng tea both contain herbs that can help reduce overproduction of the stress hormone cortisol, which can hamper memory. The herbs also help keep you alert.
16. **Sit quietly, choose a word that calms you, and when your mind starts to wander, say the word silently.** A form of meditation, this type of activity can reduce the stress hormone cortisol, which zaps memory. Meditation also helps mitigate focus-stealing feelings like depression and anxiety.
17. **Get with the times—keep calendars in every room.** Checking calendars keeps you focused and oriented, while creating a mental picture of the day in your head.
18. **Get some class. Live near a college?** Research shows that taking courses—even just auditing them—can stave off dementia at an early age. Don't go in for formal learning? Check out book readings, seminars, and other educational events.
19. **Wear a helmet.** Riding your bike is great for your health—until you fall and get a concussion. Even one serious concussion could increase your risk of developing dementia. So protect your physical brain as meticulously as you would protect its functioning by doing brain teasers.
20. **Sip red wine, judiciously.** Up to two glasses for women and up to three for men weekly delivers the powerful antioxidant resveratrol, which may prevent free radicals from damaging brain cells. But beware: Drinking more than that could leach thiamine, a brain-boosting nutrient.
21. **Check your thyroid.** It's a tiny little gland in your neck, but it could have a big effect on brain health: Thyroid hormones (T4 and T3) help nerve cells make connections. If you don't have enough of them you may be depressed, tired, and foggy-headed.
22. **Choose lean pork loin crusted in peanuts and broccoli over fries and a burger.** The pork and peanuts are high in thiamin, a nutrient that reduces inflammation that damages brain cells. The folate in broccoli is good for keeping synapses firing correctly.
23. **Replace candy with a sweet pick-me-up of pears, apples, oranges, and cantaloupe.** The combination prevents elevated blood sugar that could impede brain cells from firing correctly. It also provides fiber and antioxidants that help scrub plaque from brain arteries and mop up free radicals that inhibit clear thinking.
24. **Top rolled oats with cinnamon for a brainy breakfast.** The oats scrub plaques from your brain arteries, while a chemical in cinnamon is good for keeping your blood sugar in check—which can improve neurotransmission.
25. **Turn up the tunes.** TV may provide a lot of stimuli, but watching too much can dull brain transmission. Instead, spend an afternoon listening to your favorite music. Music can lower stress hormones that inhibit memory and increase feelings of well-being that improve focus.
26. **Curry up.** The active ingredient in Indian curry, turmeric, contains resveratrol, the same powerful antioxidant that makes red wine good for brain health. Eat curry once a week, or sprinkle it on salads, to protect brain cells from harmful free radicals.
27. **Take a food break.** Research shows that people who fast one day a week or month unlock a unique form of blood glucose that helps the brain more efficiently transmit information. Then break your fast with brain-healthy blueberries, walnuts, and maybe a glass of red wine.
28. **Replace the olive oil in your favorite vinaigrette with walnut oil.** Walnut oil, which is chock-full of brain-healthy omega-3s, cuts brain inflammation, a precursor to many cognitive problems. It also keeps oxygen-rich blood flowing to your brain by thinning the blood slightly.
29. **Go wild with fish.** While fish is generally good for you, the metals that accumulate in farmed fish like tilapia may contribute to cognitive impairments. So when you're shopping, check that the fish is from the wild, not domestically raised, and stick with heart- and brain-healthy fish like salmon and sardines.
30. **Redecorate and redesign your environment.** Plant new flowers in front of your house. Redecorate the kitchen. Rearrange your closets and drawers. Replace the candles in your living room with some that have a different scent. Making such changes can alter motor pathways in the brain and encourage new cell growth.
31. **Choose a side.** Talk sports, business, or politics. If you can do it without getting angry, which raises the memory-hindering hormone cortisol, engaging in a

good debate can form new neural pathways and force you to think quickly and formulate your thoughts clearly.

32. **Sleep.** Shut-eye isn't a luxury. It's when your brain consolidates memories. Poor sleep, caused by medical conditions, worry, depression, or insomnia, can interfere with your rest. So treat yourself to relaxing scents like vanilla before bed. They raise the chemical dopamine and reduce cortisol, a stress hormone.
33. **Check your neck.** It may sound crazy, but a clot in your neck can stunt your memory by preventing enough blood and oxygen from getting to your brain. At your next checkup, ask your doctor to use the other side of his stethoscope to ensure that all's clear in your carotid artery—the main one in your neck.
34. **Take a mental picture.** Connect names with faces by creating mental images that trick your mind into remembering. For instance, remember Mr. Bender with the curly hair by imagining him bent over, with his curly hair facing you.
35. **Read the news.** Keeping up with the latest not only activates the memory part of the brain but also gives you something to talk about with friends and family. That kind of socializing can activate multiple parts of your brain and encourage cell growth.
36. **Turn off the TV and pick up an instrument.** Frequently tickling the ivories or blowing a horn—especially if you're trying to master it—is associated with lower dementia risks. What's more, it eliminates boredom, a brain state that can cause some thinking skills to atrophy.
37. **Join a book club.** Pick up a good book to cut down on brain-withering boredom. Frequent reading is associated with reduced risk of dementia. And meeting new people forces new neural connections. Besides, you might enjoy the book.
38. **Play Yahtzee!** Whether you choose Risk, Pictionary, Scrabble, or Boggle, board games are associated with a lower risk of developing dementia. They activate strategic, spatial, and memory parts of the brain, and require you to socialize, which can help form new neural pathways.
39. **Parlez-vous brain health?** You don't have to be a linguist to benefit from learning a new language. Adopting a foreign tongue boosts the verbal, language, and memory parts of the brain.
40. **Savor a sensory experience.** Those with the best memories take advantage of all their senses. That's because memorization is a cohesive brain effort. So head to the garden or the kitchen and take in the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and sensations.
41. **Quick temper?** Instead of yelling, take a few minutes to cool down. The stress of chronic anger can actually shrink the memory centers in the brain. Get to know the signs that you're seething and address the problem before it erupts.
42. **Replace your salt shaker with a sodium-free alternative.** We all know that hypertension can lead to heart problems, but new evidence suggests that decreasing the salt in your diet can also improve blood flow to the brain and decrease dementia.
43. **Have a chat.** Instead of popping in another movie rental, pick up the phone. Talking with someone else not only gets you out of your rut—lack of activity can decrease brain-cell formation—but the socializing can also reduce potentially memory-sapping depression.
44. **Check your meds.** It may not be you having the memory problems; instead, it could be your medications impeding your memory. Older antidepressants, anti-diuretics and antihistamines—all block a critical brain chemical from doing its job. Ask your doctor for an alternative.
45. **Bear some weight.** Adding a little strength training to your daily walks can help protect brain cells from damage done by free radicals—and encourage new brain-cell growth. So strap some weights on your ankles or wrists as you walk, or practice gentle yoga.
46. **Let yourself sleep in.** Research shows that when you're chronically sleep-deprived, your body doesn't have the time to build proteins and other brain-boosting components. So instead of waking yourself early, sleep until you wake naturally.
47. **Take an afternoon catnap.** Most of sleep's boost to concentration and memory happens in the first stage, so even a snooze as short as 30 minutes can benefit your brain.
48. **Switch hands.** It may be uncomfortable, but writing with your nondominant hand or operating a computer mouse with that hand can activate parts of the brain that aren't easily triggered otherwise. Anything that requires the brain to pay close attention to a formerly automatic behavior will stimulate brain-cell growth.

49. **Shake your body.** Gentle bouncing of your knees and shaking out of your limbs reduces the brain-sapping stress hormone cortisol, research shows. It also triggers relaxation and alertness that keeps your brain sharp. Do it for a few minutes in the morning and at night.

50. **Tour your neighborhood.** If your neighborhood is growing, check it out. The exploration will change your mental map of the neighborhood. Along with learning new and better routes to your favorite stores or restaurants, you'll forge new neural pathways in your brain.