

Newsflash

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May is Mental Health Month

Coffee's Brain Benefits

Sipping coffee regularly has been associated with a lower risk of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. Now a laboratory study from the Krembil Research Institute in Canada has found a possible explanation for that benefit: phenylindanes, compounds that develop as coffee beans are roasted, and give drinks like espresso their bitter tang. Phenylindanes seem to prevent beta amyloid and tau proteins – which pile up in the brains of people with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's – from clumping into plaque that can lead to the death of the brain cells. Dark roast coffees have the highest levels of phenylindanes, whether they're caffeinated or decaffeinated.



Can Mood Affect Blood Sugar

The most optimistic women in a recent 14-year study were 12 percent less likely to develop type 2 diabetes than those with the least positive attitude. A negative outlook may be linked to higher levels of inflammation and the "stress" hormone cortisol, which are associated with insulin resistance, researchers say. If you're a negative thinker, taking small steps toward a more positive attitude may help improve your health.

What is mental illness?

Mental illnesses are brain-based conditions that affect thinking, emotions, and behaviors. Since we all have brains – having some kind of mental health problem during your life is really common.

For people who have mental illnesses, their brains have changed in a way in which they are unable to think, feel, or act in ways they want to. For some, this means experiencing extreme and unexpected changes in mood – like feeling more sad or worried than normal. For others, it means not being able to think clearly, not being able to communicate with someone who is talking to them, or having bizarre thoughts to help explain weird feelings they are having.

Unlike other general physical illness, mental illnesses are related to problems that start in the brain. The brain is an organ. Just like any other organs in our body, it can experience changes based on life experiences like stress, trauma, lack of sleep, and nutrition. Generally, when someone has a mental illness, something has changed in such a way that their brain and the way that it works has also changed.

Having negative feelings and thoughts does not mean you have a mental illness. To be diagnosed with a mental illness, the negative changes in thinking and emotions have to:

1. Seriously affect your ability to do things you want to do (what doctors call Pervasive); and
2. Stick around for longer than it should (what doctors call Persistent).

Negative feelings can come from life changes, like moving to college, losing friends, or grief. These changes in mood are not mental illness – this is just dealing with life circumstances. For some people, extreme life circumstances (like trauma or significant stress) that are not addressed can develop in a more serious problem – a mental illness.

Getting Better

No matter what kind of mental health problem someone is facing, it is always possible to get better. If you think you're experiencing a mental illness, try to find any kind of support earlier than later. Like other illness, treating mental illnesses early can help you get better faster.

– Mental Health America

Keys to Healthy Aging

The following 10 recommendations are derived from the Center for Aging and Population Health at the University of Pittsburgh and the Consumer Reports Health Ratings Center.

Lower your blood pressure. The ideal systolic pressure, or top number, is below 120 millimeters of mercury, and the optimal diastolic, or lower number, is less than 80 mm Hg. More than 70 percent of people age 60 and older have hypertension, but lifestyle changes and medication can help.

Stop smoking. Even people who quit in their 70s or older can benefit.

Participate in cancer screening. The most effective tests available, according to the Consumer Reports Health Ratings Center, are colon-cancer screenings for adults age 50 to 75, breast-cancer screenings for women 50 to 74, and cervical-cancer screenings for women 21 to 65. For most people, the risks outweigh the benefits for tests for bladder, lung, oral, ovarian, pancreatic, prostate, skin, and testicular cancers. Note that our recommendations often differ with age and risk factors. Discuss which cancer screenings are right for you with your health care provider.

Get immunized regularly. Everyone over age 50 should talk with his or her doctor about when to get vaccinated against the flu, pneumonia, and shingles. Also ask if you need to have the following vaccines: hepatitis (A and B); measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR); tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap); and varicella (chicken pox). And ask about renewing your tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine.

Reduce blood glucose. Cut your risk of type 2 diabetes by lowering your fasting blood glucose level to below 100 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dl) with weight loss and increased physical activity.

Lower LDL cholesterol. Aim for an LDL (bad) cholesterol level below 100 mg/dl by being physically active, eating healthfully, maintaining normal weight, and if prescribed by your doctor, taking medication.

Be physically active. Everyone can do something to improve their health at any age. But check with your doctor before starting a new physical activity routine.

Maintain healthy bones, joints and muscles. You can delay or prevent conditions that damage them by doing strength-training exercise regularly and maintaining a healthy weight.

Cultivate social contacts. Staying connected to friends, family, and your community helps you stay emotionally, physically, and cognitively healthy.

Combat depression. Being consistently depressed is not a normal part of life at any age. If you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

Your Heart May Benefit From Volunteering

Older adults who stay active by volunteering may derive a health boost. A study published online is the first to examine all the available peer-reviewed evidence regarding the psychosocial health benefits of volunteering for adults age 50 and older.

Researchers found that volunteering is associated with reduced depression, better overall health, fewer functional limitations, and greater longevity. The data also indicates that health benefits may depend on a moderate level of volunteering – there appears to be a tipping point after which greater benefits no longer accrue. The “sweet spot” appears to be about 100 annual hours, or two to three hours per week. Other studies have shown heart-health benefits to volunteering, even among adolescents. One reason for the benefits is a reduction in stress, which can increase blood pressure and heart rate. By focusing on others, you place less emphasis on your problems and the causes of stress in your life.

Volunteers also tend to be more physically active. By being up and around helping others, you’re spending less time sitting. The more you can get physical activity into your day, the greater the benefits for weight management and blood pressure control. While the best type of volunteering for heart health hasn’t been determined in research, experts say the key is to do something you find enjoyable and rewarding. That way you’ll be more likely to stick with it.

