

Your Brain: Use it or lose it

Experts recommend everything from electronic games to crossword puzzles to keep your mind tuned up

BY CHLSEA BURGHE | LEWISTON TRIBUNE

When it comes to mental fitness, one familiar adage for physical fitness still applies — use it or lose it.

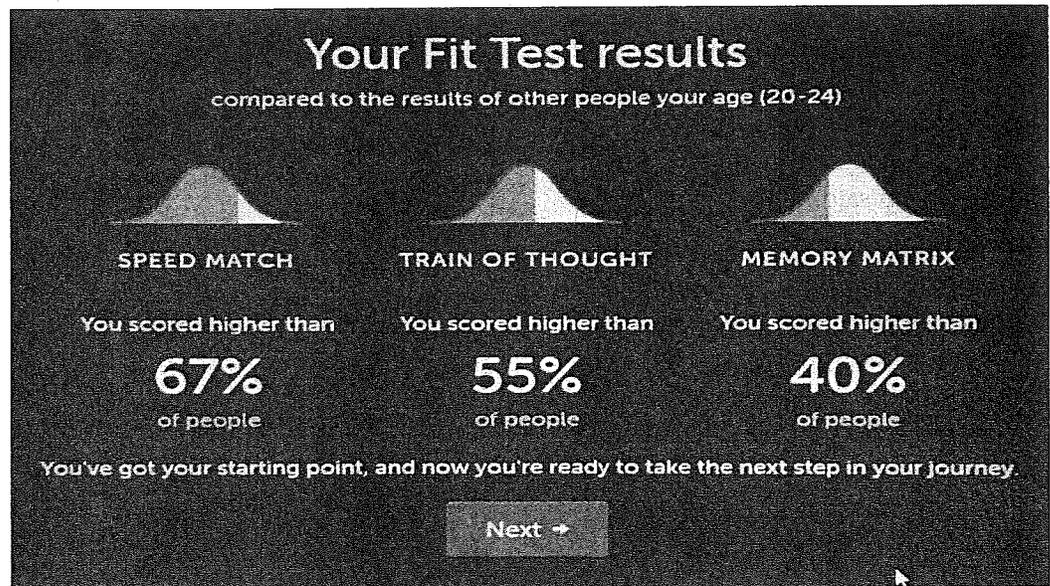
A host of brain-training programs have been made available in recent years, offering workouts for reaction time, memory and other cognitive functions. Experts agree the programs show promise, but like other exercise regimens, brain games likely work better when they're not working alone.

Dr. Jean Thomas, a neurologist at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Lewiston, said there's a trifecta of factors for maintaining or improving cognitive health.

"The brain games are the mental stimulation," she said, "but you gotta have the diet, and you gotta have the exercise."

Socializing is also a part of that mental stimulation, Thomas said, adding that she's seen more than once a patient who retired, kept to themselves at home and suffered for it.

Digital brain games currently on the market range from smartphone apps to online programs, and from



Lumosity, an online cognitive training program, tests the user in three areas and then uses the results to develop a personalized brain game regimen.

words to numbers to interactive play. Thomas and Dr. Rajal Cohen, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and Communication Studies at the University of Idaho, agreed those developed by neuroscientists appeared the most well vetted. Those include Lumosity, an online training program, and Brain Age for Nintendo DS.

Lumosity tests its users in a handful of cognitive functions and then develops a personalized exercise regimen for them, while Brain Age features a variety of word and number puzzles, incorporating touch

screen use and verbal commands.

Cohen said personalized training programs, like Lumosity, could be particularly helpful.

"We tend to want to do the things that we're good at," she said, "... but if you're trying to get better, you actually have to do the things that you're worse at."

The best kind of brain game is one that's challenging and engaging, Cohen added. Thomas continues to recommend crossword puzzles, Sudoku and card games to her patients.

Practicing brain training even

once may result in a slight benefit, but Cohen and Thomas agreed more regular practice will likely result in more, longer-term improvements.

“Give yourself a break, but do something,” Thomas said.

But there’s no particular age at which a person should start cognitive training.

“I think if you’re feeling like you’re slipping and you wanna try (brain games) out, you should investigate them,” Cohen said.

Thomas said many of her patients become motivated to work on their cognitive health when they see a family member or friend suffer from chronic illness like dementia. There are a number of risk factors

for the disease, she said, including a lower level of education, occupations like factory work that don’t always come with mental stimulation, high levels of stress, a poor diet, little to no exercise and little to no socializing.

But there are also a number of steps people can take that may help prevent dementia, Alzheimer’s and related illnesses. (See neuroprotective steps.) Thomas added that it’s never too late to start taking those preventive steps.

Cohen expounded upon the importance of exercise, noting the brain is made of physical matter that needs to be toned and supported.

“Aerobic exercise is definitely

important,” she said. “If you can combine exercise with cognitive challenge, that’s the best. ... And if it has a social component to it, all the better.”

Staying engaged with the world is the ultimate goal, Cohen said.

“Brain games have promise but they’re really still being explored,” she said. “There’s a danger of making too much of them, but there’s also a good possibility for them going in new and fascinating and beneficial directions.”

Neuroprotective steps

- Take vitamins. Baby aspirin and a multiple B-vitamin can be taken daily. Omega 3 fatty acids, resveratrol (found in red wine) and turmeric can also help.

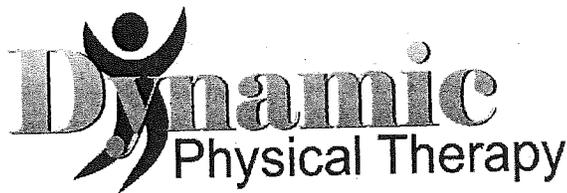
- Eat a healthy diet. Include whole grains, vegetables and berries. Avoid processed foods. Try to keep blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol down.

- Exercise. Walk, run or swim daily. Take efforts to use the stairs instead of an elevator, and park farther away on purpose.

- Use your mind. Do crossword puzzles, read books, learn an instrument or a foreign language and develop hobbies, like gardening or playing bridge.

- Socialize. Join clubs or groups, volunteer or get involved with your community or church.

Source: Dr. Jean Thomas



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