

# Healthy Lifestyle Habits Linked to Better Memory

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Healthy lifestyle habits in young adulthood are associated with better memory abilities in later life, new research suggests.

Results from a new survey of more than 18,000 adults showed that self-reported memory problems were inversely related to healthy behaviors.

In addition, specific reports of healthy eating, not smoking, and regular exercise were all linked with better memory. Interestingly, participants older than 60 years reported healthier behaviors than their younger peers.

"As expected, we found that memory complaints increased with age and that healthy behaviors were associated with better memory," lead author Gary W. Small, MD, professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and director of the UCLA Longevity Center, told *Medscape Medical News*.

"A little more surprising was that 14% of the young people in our study had memory complaints. So these are issues that are affecting people of all ages," added Dr. Small.

The investigators note that the findings reinforce the importance of clinicians educating young people to practice positive lifestyle behaviors to help mitigate future symptoms of dementia and to preserve their memory.



**Dr. Gary Small**

"Ultimately, if we are to prepare for the aging of society and a doubling of the older population by 2040, it will behoove government and individuals to draw lessons from the results of this study."

The study [was published](#) in the June issue of *International Psychogeriatrics*.

**34 Million Dementia Sufferers**

"Age is the greatest single risk factor for developing dementia," write the researchers, adding that approximately 34 million people currently suffer from the disorder.

It is estimated that 10% of those older than 65 years have the disorder, with the number increasing dramatically to 45% of individuals older than 85.

"Dementia symptoms usually begin gradually and are preceded by years of steadily increasing cognitive declines — initially mild age-related memory complaints, followed by mild cognitive impairment," write the investigators.

Although previous research has linked healthy behaviors to a decreased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, studies that have examined the link between these behaviors and milder memory complaints in people from different age groups "are limited."

A random sample of 18,552 adults in all 50 states participated in this study, which was conducted between December 2011 and the end of January 2012. This included 4423 participants who were between the ages of 18 and 39 years (known as the "younger group"), 6356 who were between 40 and 59 years (the "middle-aged group"), and 7773 who were between 60 and 99 years (the "older group").

The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, a daily landline and cell phone survey, was used to ask the participants about demographics. The pollsters also asked questions from the Healthy Behavior Index (HBI) on smoking, eating, and exercise habits.

A mean HBI score required that individuals were nonsmokers and that they exercised weekly, had healthy eating behaviors, and participated in weekly consumption of fruits and vegetables.

### **Dose-Dependent Response**

Results showed that the older group had a higher mean HBI score of 69.8 vs 60.7 for the middle-aged group and 57.9 for the younger group.

In addition, only 12.4% of the older group smoked compared with 23.7% and 24.8% of the other groups, respectively. The older group also reported eating healthier (80.4% vs 65.8% and 56.2%, respectively).

A total of 14% of the younger group, 22% of the middle-aged group, and 26% of the older group reported having memory problems. But those with these types of problems also had significantly lower mean HBI scores (60.9 vs 66.2 for those without memory problems).

For all individuals who revealed not participating in any of the healthy behaviors that were asked about, the odds ratio (OR) of reporting memory problems was 2.11 (95% confidence interval, 1.85 - 2.41).

Other notable findings regarding the specific healthy behaviors include the following:

- Older adults who did not eat healthily had an OR of 1.86 for memory problems compared with those who reported better eating habits.
- On the other hand, healthy eating was linked with better memory in all 3 groups.

- Smoking increased the OR for memory problems to 1.88 in young adults compared with nonsmokers.
- Weekly exercise was linked to better memory in the middle-aged and older groups, but not in their younger peers.
- Obesity predicted memory problems in the 2 older groups.

"Other research suggests that individuals who engage in one healthy behavior are likely to engage in others," write the investigators.

"In our study, respondents engaging in just one healthy behavior...were 21% less likely to report memory symptoms than those who did not," they write, adding that those who engaged in 2 healthy behaviors were 45% less likely, those who engaged in 3 behaviors were 75% less likely, and those who engaged in 4 behaviors were 111% less likely.

### **Public Health Impact**

The researchers point out that it was interesting that the older group reported healthier behaviors, "which counters the stereotype of aging as a time of life characterized by immobility, dependence, and both physical and mental decline."

But Dr. Small noted that older people are more likely to suffer consequences from unhealthy behaviors, including diabetes and cardiac disease, so are often encouraged to change. These behaviors are also associated with shorter life expectancies.

### **Technology Eroding Memory?**

He also noted that the memory problems reported by the younger group could be caused by attention-deficit problems, stress, drug use, or even use of technology.

"You don't really need to remember phone numbers and addresses and appointments as long as you remember to have your smartphone with you," said Dr. Small.

"I think the problem is that we overuse these devices and it distracts us from what's going on in everyday life. So we're not paying attention. It's also training our brains to think in a different way — to jump from idea to idea just as we jump from Web site to Web site."

Dr. Small wrote about this issue [in the book](#), *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (HarperCollins). He also noted that previous research has shown that the more someone uses a computer, the less they exercise and the greater the risk for being overweight.

Overall, the investigators note that encouraging healthy behaviors in all age groups "has the potential for significant public health impact in limiting and forestalling morbidities associated with age-related cognitive decline and neurodegeneration."

"These programs don't have to be daunting to get people on the right track," added Dr. Small. "And once they get started, they begin to notice those immediate improvements in memory, which motivates them to continue until these behaviors become habits over the long haul."

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