Ever heard of a runner's high? Or have you stumbled upon a great idea while on the step machine at the gym? We all know that exercise can help us lose weight, reduce the risk of heart disease, improve our blood pressure, energy levels and sleep patterns and reduce stress. But, you may not realize that all of your visits to the gym or the trail can also improve the signs of aging and boost your brain performance and overall mental health.

James A. Blumenthal, Ph.D., and his colleagues surprised many people in 1999 when their study showed that regular exercise was as effective as antidepressant medications for patients with major depression. Newer study results, published in the January 2005 issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, looked at exercise alone in treating mild to moderate depres-
The researchers studied adults aged 20 to 45, finding that depressive symptoms were reduced almost 50 percent in individuals who participated in 30-minute aerobic exercise sessions three to five times a week. These findings are comparable to results from studies in which patients with mild to moderate depression were treated with antidepressants or cognitive therapy.

For years researchers believed that endorphins were the primary source of that feel-good sensation as a result of exercise. Endorphins are natural opiates similar to those found in morphine. However, because it is very difficult for those endorphins to cross the blood brain barrier, doctors are beginning to question this theory. Recent studies have discovered that exercise boosts activity in the brain's frontal lobes and the hippocampus. This might explain why so many people believe they can think better after moving around a bit. Exercise is also responsible for increasing levels of three mood-enhancing chemicals, serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine, acting much like an antidepressant.

Dr. Frederick Carrick, professor of neurology and president of the ACA Council on Neurology, explains the neurochemical foundation for this phenomenon, “The effects of exercise on brain function are multifold. For example, exercise leads to increased serum calcium levels, resulting in an increase in the calcium level in the brain. This in turn enhances brain dopamine synthesis, and increased dopamine modifies and/or affects brain function, which might induce [positive] physiological, behavioral and psychological changes.”

Whether you approach it scientifically or anecdotally, one thing is certain, exercise makes you happy.

Dr. Pam Stone of Stone Family Chiropractic Center in Kennesaw,Ga., runs an average of 20 to 40 miles a week. A veteran of several marathons and the Ironman triathlon, Stone has made exercise the cornerstone of her life. “I plan it into my schedule; it is a part of my weekly calendar and a major priority in my life.” she says. This past summer Stone was injured when a motorcycle hit her. Doctor’s orders to stay in bed and heal were brutal on her mental health. “I was depressed. I had to wait two months to heal; if I had to wait any longer I probably would have gone crazy,” she recalls. “When I was enduring my forced time off it made me appreciate how good exercise makes me feel.”

Stone also believes in the cognitive effects of exercise. “Exercise reduces my stress level and provides me a way to think and brainstorm. Just this weekend I was trying to write something and had writer’s block. I just left my desk and did a five-mile run. When I returned, I knew what I needed to write about.”

Stone is coping correctly, as the hippocampus plays an integral role in learning and memory and is negatively affected by high levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Exercise is an ideal way to reduce levels of cortisol and hence improve the flow of creative juices. Stone also advises people to get out and exercise, “at the end of the day, when you are most tired ... force yourself to get up and get out there, move.” Your body will respond positively and you will notice a sharp increase in alertness and energy.

In older people, exercise helps delay or prevent chronic illnesses and diseases associated with aging and contributes to an improved quality of life. Indeed, a recent study of the effects of exercise on mental capacity in seniors at the University of Illinois shows promising data that suggests physical exercise trumps mental exercise when it comes to the sharpness of one’s mind as they age. Walkers and runners will have more smarts as they age than anyone sitting on a couch doing a crossword puzzle (even the Sunday New York Times edition).

Using exercise to stimulate creativity is a common tool for many people. Fred Showker, 60-seconds.com, suggests this innovative way to use exercise to get your creative juices flowing:

Set yourself a topic or problem about which you’d like to have some new ideas. Set a timer for 15 minutes and start doing whatever routine tasks you need to do. When the timer goes off, take out your notepad and jot down whatever new ideas you have in that moment. When you run out, reset it, and repeat the process. The great thing is that you don’t need to consciously think about the topic while working, but often you’ll find your subconscious mind continues to work on it and give you ideas.

Dr. Carrick agrees, suggesting that, “The brain areas with increased activity receive and integrate the information from different sensory systems. Sensory systems involve allowing the brain to process information.”

Exercise reduces stress and improves mood and creativity, but you can do more to enhance your cognitive function by eating properly. Indeed, eating for your brain is critical to mental
health as well.

The brain is a demanding organ, requiring several things in addition to exercise to maintain optimum performance. It uses large quantities of oxygen and nutrients to function. Mental fatigue and a decline in alertness are most often the result of inadequate nutrients and oxygen in the brain.

Certain foods tend to optimize brain performance, for instance, egg yolks, soybeans, cabbage, peanuts and cauliflower, fish, eggs and poultry. Magnesium-rich foods, such as wheat bran, nuts, whole grains, leafy green vegetables, milk, meat, beans and bananas are a fine place to start your meal planning. Color is essential too. Nutritionist Carolyn O’Neil, M.S., R.D. and co-author of the book, “The Dish on Eating Healthy and Being Fabulous,” suggests that “the best sources for brain nutrients include deeply colored produce from blueberries to butternut squash. But, don’t underestimate the nutrient content of white vegetables such as cauliflower and parsnips—they are packed with phyto-nutrients, too.” And for added thought she advises, “Another thing to consider: being dehydrated affects mental function. Feeling a bit foggy or forgetful? Maybe you need to drink some water. Dehydration can cause headaches, irritability and loss of focus.”

The food on your plate should have lots of color, berries (especially strawberries and/or blueberries) and melons are a great source of ‘brain food,’ as are green, orange and red vegetables. O’Neil recommends that when you crave a snack, reach for a handful of peanuts or almonds, an apple, orange, banana, grapes or even a few squares of dark chocolate.

The website, newscientist.com, suggests several foods that may improve brain function: whole-wheat toast with a bean spread for breakfast, a choline-rich lunch such as an omelet. Choline is known to improve memory because it assists in neurotransmitter function. Yogurt, which contains tyrosine (also essential for neurotransmitter function), also improves alertness and memory. Of course, fish is indisputably the best brain food, replete with Omega-3 fatty acids which are essential fats and the best ones for the brain.

Stand up while on the phone, walk the dog, walk before and after each meal, park far away, take the stairs, vacuum or mow—finding opportunities to get out and move is quite easy. More importantly, there are so many compelling reasons to exercise, and with side effects such as weight loss, improved mood and better creativity, what’s stopping you?

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