Can 6 Months of Exercise Improve Cognitive Function?

Working out can boost the thinking skills of those at risk for cognitive decline.

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Aerobic exercise confers plenty of benefits on those who indulge. Now, new findings published in the journal Neurology suggest that six months of regular cardio activity, such as walking, jogging or cycling on a stationary bike, can help reverse cognitive problems in older adults, reports the American Academy of Neurology.

For the study, researchers recruited 160 men and women with an average age of 65 with cognitive impairments but no dementia and risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as high blood pressure. (All participants engaged in little to no physical activity.)

Scientists wanted to determine the effects of aerobic exercise and the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet on the executive function— a person's ability to control his or her own behavior, pay attention, organize and achieve goals—of adults with these health issues.

(The DASH Diet is a low-sodium, high-fiber diet rich in fruits and vegetables, beans, nuts, low-fat dairy products, whole grains and lean meats.)

Investigators randomly assigned participants to one of the following categories: those who performed six months of aerobic exercise, folks who received only DASH diet counseling, individuals who completed a combination of both aerobic exercise and DASH, and people who received health education.

Those in the exercise group worked out three times each week for 45 minutes executing warm-up exercises followed by walking, jogging or cycling.

Next, researchers used cognitive tests to evaluate participants' abilities to think and remember and measured participants' cardiorespiratory fitness via treadmill stress tests. In addition, scientists assessed heart health by measuring blood pressure, blood sugar and lipids.

Findings showed that exercise improved everyone's thinking skills but did not improve memory. In addition, participants who exercised and adhered to the DASH diet achieved the greatest benefits compared with those who only exercised, only followed the diet or only received health education.

“The results are encouraging in that in just six months, by adding regular exercise to their lives, people who have cognitive impairment without dementia may improve their ability to plan and complete certain cognitive tasks,” said James A. Blumenthal, PhD, of Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, an author of the study.

Blumenthal noted that in order to determine whether the DASH diet combined with exercise continues to improve cognitive abilities further research with larger groups for longer time periods is warranted.

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