



The AGS Foundation for  
Health in Aging's

You Must Remember This:

# Advice for Improving Your Memory

If you can't seem to remember things as well as you used to, “conquering the planet” may help.

In the first study of its kind, researchers recently found that older adults can improve their memories and other mental abilities by playing a video game in which players use planning and strategy to take over the world.

As we grow older we all tend to find it *somewhat* harder to remember and carry out other mental tasks. Looking for a way to help older adults boost these abilities, the researchers trained volunteers in their 60s and 70s to play “Rise of Nations,” a video game that rewards you for successfully managing, building and expanding empires. Compared with 20 older people who hadn't played the game, 20 who had showed improvement in working memory (the ability to “hold on to” small bits of information for a short period of time), visual memory (the ability to recall information from pictures and lists, for example), and other thinking abilities, the researchers report in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

Dominating the world isn't the only way to improve your memory and other thinking abilities, of course. Seeing your healthcare professional regularly is a crucial part of maintaining your “mental vitality.” That's because health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and depression can cause thinking problems if left untreated. Exercising—at least 30 minutes, three times a week—can also help, by increasing blood flow to your brain and, some research suggests, helping new brain cells grow. In fact, exercising the body helps the brain grow nerve cells in that part of the brain where working memory resides. And the more exercise the better.

Getting enough sleep—at least 7 or 8 hours a night—can help you concentrate and remember better. Eating a good diet—lots of fruits and vegetables, along with whole grains, and fish like salmon, tuna, and sardines, which are rich in heart- and brain-healthy omega-3 fatty acids—is essential. And don't forget activities—like yoga, meditation, and prayer—that take the edge off stress, which can make it harder to learn and recall. Activities that involve solving problems and other mental “work”—like reading, learning an instrument or language, playing bridge, or participating in a discussion group—also keep your mind find-tuned, as does socializing regularly. (For more about these strategies, see the FHA's “cognitive vitality” tip sheet at [http://www.healthinaging.org/public\\_education/thinking\\_vitality.php](http://www.healthinaging.org/public_education/thinking_vitality.php))

In addition to the above strategies for keeping your mind in shape, consider these tips, specifically for maximizing memory:

**See your healthcare provider if you snore at night and feel sleepy by day** Snoring while sleeping and feeling drowsy the next day can be signs of sleep apnea. People with untreated sleep apnea stop breathing briefly, but repeatedly, while sleeping. This interrupted breathing can deprive the brain of oxygen and, recent research suggests, may cause parts of the brain called mammillary bodies—which play an important role in memory—to shrink.

**Eat your carbohydrates** Diets that are very low in carbohydrates—such as fruits, vegetables, bread, and pasta—can interfere with memory. That's because your body breaks down carbohydrates or “carbs” into a form of sugar called glucose, and your brain runs on glucose. In another recent study, women on a low-carb diet scored significantly lower on memory tests than those eating a more balanced diet. When these women started eating carbs again, their memories improved.

**Minimize multitasking** Doing two or more things at once—like reading this tip sheet and listening to the news at the same time—will make it harder for you to recall either later. That’s because multitasking makes it harder for you to process detailed information. Multitasking overloads your working memory circuits. According to researchers at UCLA, you usually process new information in the part of your brain called the cerebral cortex. But multitasking forces your brain to process some information in an area called the striatum, which can handle fewer details than the cortex.

**Double-check your meds with your healthcare provider**

Certain antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, blood pressure and cholesterol medications, sleeping pills, ulcer drugs, painkillers and allergy meds can affect your memory—especially if you take more than one of these drugs. Talk to your healthcare provider if you start having trouble remembering things after starting a new drug. Adjusting the dose of your medications, or switching from one drug to another may well solve the problem. If you’re being treated for diabetes, making sure the treatment is just right is particularly important, since blood sugar levels that are too high or too low can cause the memory to fail.

**Trust your memory** Worrying about forgetting can make it harder to remember things. In a recent study published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*, a group of healthy older adults who were told that “aging causes forgetfulness” did worse on memory tests than a group that wasn’t told anything about aging and memory. Older adults in a third group who were told that memory declined only somewhat—but not that much—with age, scored the highest of all.

The following time-tested strategies can also make it easier to remember when your flight is leaving, where you put your gloves, and what you need at the grocery store:

**Write it down** Keeping some sort of diary in which you write down your appointments, and carrying it with you, can help you keep track of what you need to do, when, and where.

**Give everything a place** Designate a specific place for your glasses—say, on your nightstand. Every time you take them off, put your glasses in that spot. Designate other places for your keys, your medications, your wallet, your checkbook, and the remote control.

**Try these memory tricks** For thousands of years, these simple strategies have been helping people remember:

*To remember several items if you don’t have pen and paper on hand to make a list:* Come up with a word or phrase using the first letter in the name of each item. Let’s say you need to get lettuce, salmon, coffee, eggs, milk, and apples from the store. Create a sentence with words that start with the first letter of each item—L, S, C, E, M, and A. You might try: “Lucy Saw Camels Eating Milk and Apples.” Repeat that phrase to yourself a few times, or visualize (imagine) a girl (Lucy) watching camels eat a mixture of milk and apples.

*To learn and remember someone’s name:* Try visualizing the name and connecting the image with a noticeable feature of the person you’ve just met. Let’s say you were just introduced to a Mr. Douglas, who happens to have very large feet. Imagine him having dug (“Doug”) the last (“las”) of a series of holes, and standing with his big feet in that final hole.

Finally, your brain works like a computer, but think of it as a muscle. Keep it healthy, happy and well worked out. Find something that really stimulates your mind and an exercise, like walking, that you really enjoy. Then find a partner to share the fun. With a companion you will be much more likely to enjoy the effort and more likely to keep going.



**Foundation for Health in Aging**

Established by the American Geriatrics Society



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The American Geriatrics Society is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of older adults. With a membership of over 6,000 health care professionals, the AGS has a long history of improving the health care of older adults.