

## 10 Brain Tips to Help Keep Your Brain Healthy as You Age

Practical insights from Marc Milstein, neuroscience researcher



The costs associated with an unhealthy brain can be significant. For example, the lifetime cost for someone with dementia is nearly \$400,000.<sup>1</sup> From both a financial and quality-of-life perspective, it makes sense to prioritize brain health. We spoke with Marc Milstein, a neuroscience researcher, to get insights on how we can keep our brains healthy as we age.

### 1 Does Drinking Alcohol or Coffee Affect Brain Health?

**Marc:** Let's start with coffee since it's less controversial. There's evidence that coffee and tea can benefit brain health. Both contain anti-inflammatory flavanols, which can be good for brain health. Opt for plain coffee or tea without added ingredients and avoid excessive consumption since more than five cups a day can affect heart health. Also, be mindful of caffeine's impact on sleep; stop consuming coffee and tea around noon if you have any sleep issues.

When it comes to alcohol, it's a bit more contentious. Some brain-healthy diets, such as the "Mind Diet" and Mediterranean diet, include moderate alcohol consumption, typically around one glass of wine a day. However,



We have strong evidence that simple lifestyle interventions can dramatically improve brain health and lower the risk of disease today, tomorrow, and in years to come.

—Marc Milstein, PhD

the primary benefits might come from the overall diet rather than from alcohol. Excessive alcohol can harm brain cells and memory, and its effects vary between individuals. Consult your doctor to make an informed decision.

## 2 Can Working Later in Life Help Brain Health?

**Marc:** Research suggests that if you enjoy your work and find purpose in it, it can be beneficial for brain health. Having responsibilities, feeling accomplished, and mentoring others also contribute to a sense of purpose that supports brain health. You can find this purpose in activities such as volunteering or learning new things—not just work. If you dislike your current job, explore new activities that provide fulfillment and challenge.

## 3 Which Lifestyle Categories Are Most Important for Brain Health?

**Marc:** I outline healthy habits in the following categories at [hartfordfunds.com/braintips](https://hartfordfunds.com/braintips): sleep, diet, stress, exercise, learning, and friendship. Scientifically, adopting healthy habits in all these lifestyle categories is ideal for brain health. Studies show that the more of these habits you embrace, the lower your risk of cognitive decline. If you already practice some of them, build on them gradually to avoid feeling overwhelmed. These habits are interconnected and adding one at a time can lead to better brain health.

For example, to start a walking habit, say to yourself, “I will try to walk a certain amount daily.” It can just be a few minutes a day or a few extra minutes each day. Try to build up and adopt this habit so you do it consistently. Then take this habit and add to it. For example, you might say, “I’m going to walk with a friend or listen to a podcast while I’m walking.” That way, you get the brain-health benefits of walking and learning something new.

## 4 Do Supplements and Vitamins Improve Brain Health?

**Marc:** Omega-3 supplements may not provide significant brain health benefits, but natural sources of healthy fats such as salmon, nuts, and avocados are advantageous. I suggest only considering supplements if you have a defi-

ciency that’s been confirmed by regular blood tests. Be cautious with vitamin D and B12 supplements because excessive intake can have adverse effects.

## 5 Do Brain Training Apps Really Improve Brain Health?

**Marc:** The impact of brain-training apps is mixed. Enjoying and learning from these games can benefit brain health but be cautious about exaggerated claims. They may not significantly enhance memory. If you find them enjoyable, use them as part of a diverse approach to learning new things.

## 6 How Does Our Social Life Affect Brain Health?

**Marc:** Loneliness and isolation raise the risk of memory loss and depression. Quality friendships, not quantity, are essential for brain health. Stay connected through calls, texts, meetings, and walks with friends. Interacting with others and learning new things are crucial for brain health. The bond between people and their pets can also have positive effects on brain health.

## 7 Do Saunas and Cold Plunges Improve Brain Health?

**Marc:** I’m seeing a lot about this on TikTok and Instagram. I think the ideas about the benefits stem from the affects that heat and cold can have on relaxation and anti-inflammation. Research on the effects of saunas and cold plunges on brain health is limited. Extreme temperature changes may pose risks, especially for individuals with underlying heart-health issues. Using heat and cold for injury recovery has substantial evidence. Approach saunas and cold plunges cautiously and consult your doctor if you’re considering them.

## 8 Can a Lack of Love Affect Brain Health?

**Marc:** Love, whether between people or for pets, releases chemicals such as oxytocin and endorphins, which benefit brain health. Prioritizing relationships and bonds with pets can even contribute to better brain health. Even caring for plants or engaging in activities such as gardening can provide a sense of purpose, which is beneficial for brain health.



## 9 Can Social Media Affect Brain Health?

**Marc:** Social media can have positive and negative effects. It can help us learn and connect with others, but it can also disrupt sleep and lead to excessive use. Use social media mindfully, setting boundaries and enjoying it in moderation. If it negatively impacts your well-being, it's not necessary for brain health.

For example, if it makes you feel as though everyone else is riding a jet ski while drinking champagne every moment of the day, then it's not something that's needed for brain health, and it would be best to just put it away and not check it.

## 10 What's More Important for Brain Health: Genes or Lifestyle Choices?

**Marc:** It's complicated. There are always the stories of somebody who did everything wrong but lived long with a healthy brain. I hear people say, "My uncle lived to 102, but he smoked, and he did this, and he did that. How do you explain this?" Conversely, there could be a tragic story about someone who seemed to do everything right and still suffered from a brain-health condition or other disease.

Brain health is influenced by both genetics and lifestyle. While some individuals may defy the odds due to unique factors, for the general population, it's a combination of genes and lifestyle. Most people have inherited some genetic risks, but lifestyle choices can significantly reduce those risks. Focus on habits you can control to promote better brain health.

★ **Bonus Question: What First Got You Interested in Studying Brain Health?**

**Marc:** My interest in brain health was due to personal experiences with family members facing dementia. I'm also fascinated by the brain's complexity and the potential for simple lifestyle changes to enhance brain health. Understanding the brain and its connection to well-being has helped me develop hopeful and actionable insights that help people live longer and healthier lives.

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“A sharp mind into older age isn't just a bit of luck—it's within reach for most of us”

—Marc Milstein, PhD



**Marc Milstein, PhD**

Dr. Marc Milstein is a leading scientific researcher on neuroscience, health, and happiness. His insights provide science-based solutions to keep the brain healthy, lower the risk of dementia, boost productivity and maximize longevity. He earned both his Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry and his Bachelor of Science in Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology from UCLA.

<sup>1</sup> 2023 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures Report: At a Glance Statistics, Alzheimer's Association, 2023

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