

Heart-brain connection: Fitness now protects your brain in your 70s and 80s

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Health Concerns: [Dementia](#), [Cardiovascular Disease \(CVD\)](#)



Stay fit today; avoid dementia tomorrow

It's well-known exercise plays a vital role in your physical health, and now studies propose staying fit in midlife may protect your brain as well, avoiding mental deterioration in later years.

A new study, published in [Neurology](#), that followed Swedish women for more than 40 years, suggests one's level of [physical fitness](#) predicts the amount of protection from dementia decades later.¹

Swedish dementia /exercise study began 50 years ago

At the onset of the study in 1968, 191 Swedish women ranging in age from 38 to 60 took part in a vigorous stationary cycling test to measure their exercise work capacity. Based on work capacity, women were split into low, medium, and high fitness categories. The women were followed from 1968 to 2012, and dementia diagnoses were recorded.

The measurement of exercise capacity is an important aspect of the strength of this study – it was based on the participants' actual performance rather than relying on participants' subjective reports of how much, how vigorously, and how often they exercised.

Strong association between fitness and likelihood of dementia decades later

Dementia incidence correlated with fitness level, the greater the fitness level, the less the dementia: 32 percent, 25 percent, and 5 percent of women developed dementia in the low, medium, and high fitness groups, respectively.¹ This particular study is one of the longest, following participants for up to 44 years, but shorter studies have come to similar conclusions.²⁻⁴

Another very interesting finding: in the subset of women whose initial exercise tests had to be stopped because of issues such as excessively high blood pressure, chest pain, or an abnormal EKG change, almost half (nine out of twenty women) developed dementia. **Fit women who did develop dementia did so much later in life.** Among the five percent of fit women who eventually developed dementia, the average age of development of dementia was eleven years later compared to the medium fitness group – age 90 vs. 79 – an extra eleven years of dementia-free life.

Midlife fitness also linked to brain volume 19 years later

In another study, the effects of midlife physical fitness on the brain were visualized with MRI. Participants at an average age of 40 performed a treadmill test to determine their exercise capacity. Lower exercise capacity at midlife was associated with smaller total cerebral brain volume 19 years later, suggesting having a higher fitness level helps prevent brain shrinkage with age.⁵

Diet determines your propensity for fitness

Important to note, one's fitness level is strongly linked to what you eat. People who are overweight as well as those who don't eat healthfully, do not have the will, energy or capacity for regular exercise. When you eat right, you're more likely to get fit; when you don't eat right it is very difficult to get fit.

A nutrient-dense, plant-rich diet ([Nutritarian](#)) is the most critical determinant influencing whether one gets dementia or not. When you eat right you automatically crave exercise and it becomes pleasurable to do so.

This study also demonstrates the wide [variety of health benefits](#), including reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and several cancers when you get fit. Mixing together nutritional excellence and exercise is when the magic happens to protect yourself from the common diseases of aging. Exercise offers additional benefits to [cardiovascular health](#) and insulin sensitivity, as well as some direct effects in the brain, such as the release of protective compounds called neurotrophins.^{6,7}

At any age, fitness is vital for your present and future brain health.

It is never too late to start exercising and you are never too old. Studies have documented cognitive benefits from exercise ([strength training](#) and aerobic training) in all age groups, from children to the elderly.⁶⁻⁹ Today is the day to make sure you do both; eat right and get fit.

[References](#)

Joel Fuhrman, M.D. is a board-certified family physician, six-time New York Times bestselling author and internationally recognized expert on nutrition and natural healing, who specializes in preventing and reversing disease through nutritional methods. Dr. Fuhrman coined the term "Nutritarian" to describe his longevity-promoting, nutrient dense, plant-rich eating style.

For over 25 years, Dr. Fuhrman has shown that it is possible to achieve sustainable weight loss and reverse heart disease, diabetes and many other illnesses using smart nutrition. In his medical practice, and through his books and PBS television specials, he continues to bring this life-saving message to hundreds of thousands of people around the world.