

Prime of life: Forget thinner thighs, new study shows walking protects brain size, saves memory

The Oregonian, Portland, Ore.

10-14-10

Oct. 14--Kathleen Brown steps into the October sun in a green T-shirt and size 2 denim shorts, her Nikes laced.

And if you want to remember that sequence -- or this story -- you might want to do what she does next.

Brown walks. Twice a day, she heads out into her Cedar Hills neighborhood, a habit that has kept her, a month shy of 75, trim, relaxed and requiring no medication.

Now, a new study published Wednesday in the journal of the American Academy of Neurology says walking may also save her from dementia.

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh who studied people in their mid-60s over 13 years found that those who walked six to nine miles a week -- about a mile a day -- had more gray matter and less memory loss than their peers. Gray matter is the part of the brain involved in muscle control, seeing, speaking, hearing and memory.

The relationship between walking earlier in life and having more brain volume later in life was so robust "it astonished us," said author Kirk I. Erickson, a professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. "Physical activity improves your brain and spares your brain."

Researchers studied the number of blocks that 1,479 people in their mid-60s walked a week. After nine years, they conducted brain scans on 299 of the subjects who had no sign of dementia. Four years later, they repeated the scans. They found that 4 in 10 had developed dementia or cognitive impairment.

But those who reported walking at least 72 blocks a week had less decline and they performed the best on standard memory tests. Those who walked the most had cut their risk of developing memory problems in half.

Erickson said regular exercise should become a public health imperative. The National Institute on Aging funded the study, and researchers hope to study whether physical activity can reverse or treat some of the loss.

Brown began walking in the 1970s to combat a back problem. After she retired from the telephone company in 1992, she found herself sitting around in sweat pants with an expandable waistband. First, she put on a pair of jeans to force herself to pay attention to her waist size. Then to stay active, the grandmother and widow began driving three days a week for Meals-on-Wheels. She eventually started walking daily -- in the rain, in the winter, and four years ago, began walking 45 minutes twice a day.

"I find that when I'm walking I can solve all my problems," she says. "And I feel better than I have in my whole life."

-- Julie Sullivan

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