



**HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL**  
*Trusted advice for a healthier life*

## 5 ways to keep your memory sharp

The way you live, what you eat and drink, and how you treat your body affect your memory as well as your physical health and wellbeing. Here are five things you can do every day to keep mind and body sharp.

**Manage your stress.** The constant drumbeat of daily stresses such as deadline pressures or petty arguments can certainly distract you and affect your ability to focus and recall. But the bigger problem is an ongoing sense of extreme anxiety—that can lead to memory impairment. If you don't have a strategy in place for managing your stress, protecting your memory is one reason to get one. Deep breathing, meditation, yoga, and a “mindful” approach to living can all help.



**Get a good night's sleep.** People who don't sleep well at night tend to be more forgetful than people who sleep soundly. A good night's sleep is essential for consolidating memories. The most common reason for poor sleep is insomnia—difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. Unfortunately, many medicines used to treat insomnia can also impair memory and general brain function. That's why it's best to try improving your sleep habits first and turn to medication only if those steps don't help. If you do need sleep aids, use the lowest dose for the shortest time needed to get your sleep back on track.

**If you smoke, quit.** Easier said than done, certainly, but if you need additional motivation, know that smokers have a greater degree of age-related memory loss and other memory problems than nonsmokers. People who smoke more than two packs of cigarettes a day at midlife have more than double the risk of developing dementia in old age compared with nonsmokers. However, those who stop smoking by midlife and those who smoke less than half a pack a day have a similar a risk of dementia as people who have never smoked.

**If you drink alcohol, do so moderately.** Drinking too much alcohol increases the risk for memory loss and dementia. People with alcoholism have difficulty performing short-term memory tasks, such as memorizing lists. Another type of memory loss associated with alcohol use is called Korsakoff's syndrome. In this condition, long-term vitamin B<sub>1</sub> deficiency combined with the toxic effects of alcohol on the brain can trigger sudden and dramatic amnesia. In some cases this memory loss is permanent, but if caught early, can be reversed to some degree.

**Protect your brain from injury.** Head trauma is a major cause of memory loss and increases the risk of developing dementia. Always use the appropriate gear during high-speed activities and contact sports. Wear seat belts when riding in motor vehicles. Car accidents are by far the most common cause of brain injury, and wearing seat belts greatly

reduces the chances of severe head injury. Wear a helmet when bicycling, riding on a motorcycle, in-line skating, and skiing.