

Memory Help for Seniors: 11 Proven Tips for Boosting Your Brain

Wondering if it's possible to improve your own or another senior's memory? Help definitely exists. And you don't have to buy some overhyped "miracle" brain booster in order to start enhancing your ability to remember things. In fact, many of the most effective ways to gain a better memory involve actions that you can take today—without spending tons of money.

Of course, it's natural to worry about the kind of memory decline associated with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia that require memory care. But did you know that only about one in 10 people over the age of 65 develop mild cognitive impairment (which can sometimes mimic very mild dementia)? It's true. And only around 15 percent of those people develop Alzheimer's.¹

So our fears and expectations are often exaggerated. In one survey, about 57 percent of younger adults between the ages of 18 and 64 said that they expect to have memory loss during their senior years. However, only about 25 percent of older adults over the age of 65 said they actually experience memory loss.² That's a big gap.

Nevertheless, everybody wants to retain their memory. After all, memories form a major part of who we are. When we lose them, we feel like we lose pieces of ourselves. Plus, having a good memory serves all kinds of practical functions in our daily lives. Every single day, your memory helps you accomplish both basic and complex tasks. So it's vital to keep your brain as healthy and fit as possible.

Older adults who take proactive steps to prevent memory loss are often more adaptable, independent, and satisfied during their senior years. That's because the human brain has an amazing ability to change, collect new information, create new neural connections, and store important information in its long-term memory. By developing good habits and seeking out new learning opportunities, you can also improve or maintain your short-term memory (aka your working memory).

1. Use the Method of Loci and Other Practical Tricks

Ever heard of a memory palace? It's a place you build yourself, in your own mind. But it's based on a place that you can actually walk through, in the real world. Often referred to as the method of loci, this mnemonic technique goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. According to Lynne Kelly, author of *The Memory Code*, it may even predate ancient Greece by thousands of years. Along with myths, songs, rituals, and dances, it's possible that many of the world's oldest and most mysterious monuments were created in order to serve as memory aids, helping preliterate civilizations easily recall vast stores of critical knowledge.

Today, so-called "memory athletes" use the method of loci and other mnemonic techniques to train for competitions that require the memorization of huge lists of words or long sequences of cards or numbers. But you can use the technique to memorize anything that's important to you.

Here's how it works: First, you choose a physical place that's very familiar to you, such as your house, a local walking path, or a regular driving route. Then, you visualize that place in your mind, creating a precise mental journey based on distinct objects or landmarks. You'll creatively associate each piece of information you want to remember with a particular object or landmark that's part of your mental journey or memory palace. As a very basic example, let's say you want to remember a three-item grocery list—consisting of shoelaces, salsa, and strawberry yogurt—based on a memory palace of your house. You might imagine:

- Walking up to your front door, wiping your shoes on the welcome mat, and noticing that your laces are untied and on fire.
- Entering your kitchen, opening the refrigerator door, and watching a pair of miniature Latin lovers dance to salsa music.
- Going to your bathroom and witnessing your best friend bathe in a tub of pink yogurt.

When you're at the store, you'll simply take that same mental journey, beginning at your front door. For many people, it helps to visualize bizarre or outlandish scenarios like those above. Let your imagination run wild. The more you practice this technique, the easier it will become. Plus, training your memory in this way may have long-lasting cognitive benefits.³ So it's worth learning more about the method of loci and other mnemonic techniques by exploring books such as:

- *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* by Joshua Foer
- *Memory Palace: How to Remember Everything You Learn; A Guide to Learning With Unlimited Potential* by Adam Brown
- *Unlimited Memory: How to Use Advanced Learning Strategies to Learn Faster, Remember More and be More Productive* by Kevin Horsley

In addition to visualization, many seniors have success with other easy and practical memory-enhancing methods. Here are some examples:

- **Chunking**—When trying to memorize a long sequence of numbers or a long list of words or items, break them down into smaller groupings (just as you do for phone numbers or your Social Security number). In some cases, it also helps to group items by category, bundling them into easier-to-manage chunks of information.
- **Acrostics and acronyms**—Create a short poem out of a word or sequence of letters that you need to remember. For instance, when learning how to classically tune the six strings of a guitar to E, A, D, G, B, and E, many people are taught to remember the acrostic "Every Apple Does Go Bad Eventually." Acronyms serve a similar purpose. For example, geography students are often taught to use the acronym "HOMES" in order to remember the five Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior).
- **Planning and organization**—Keep a notebook or day planner handy that has a calendar and plenty of space for writing down your various activities and appointments. At the beginning of each week, create a list of things you'll be doing in the days ahead. Then,

each day, make a detailed to-do list. It's also helpful to review everything at the end of each day, writing down your thoughts about the various experiences and conversations you had. Your planner or notebook is also a good place to keep important information like birthdays, phone numbers, and anything else you may need to know on an ongoing basis. If you're comfortable with technology, a smartphone or digital tablet can serve as your planner.

- **Talking out loud**—Just like writing stuff down helps your brain put information into long-term memory, so does talking about it. So, for example, if you want to remember something you're reading, try saying it aloud. If you want to avoid forgetting why you've entered a certain room, tell yourself where you're going—and why—while on the way there. Or to remember more complex information, try explaining it to someone else.
- **Varied repetition**—When learning new information and trying to retain it for later use, it's helpful to review it multiple times—over time—in different ways. For instance, one day, you might take notes about something. A couple days later, you might read your notes out loud. Then, a day or so after that, you might paraphrase what you've learned while talking to someone else.
- **Cues and reminders**—Give yourself visual or auditory prompts to help you remember the things you need to do. From post-it notes to alarms, it's easy to set up simple reminders. Just make sure you place them in the areas where you're most likely to see or hear them. Also, do your best to leave important objects in prominent locations that are related to the tasks you have to do.
- **Doodling**—Did you know that drawing "absentmindedly" may actually be good for your powers of attention and recall? Whether you're listening to someone talk or learning something new, making doodles may help your brain stay alert, connect various pieces of information, and retain that information for later use.⁴

2. Get Your Health Checked

Many kinds of medical conditions can cause or contribute to memory loss. So it's always wise to see your doctor if you notice any cognitive issues that don't seem to be going away on their own. Of course, most of us immediately think of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia as possible culprits. But forgetfulness can also be caused by conditions such as:

- Depression
- Thyroid problems
- Hormone imbalances
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Vitamin B12 deficiency
- Tuberculosis
- HIV infection
- Syphilis
- Blood clots just above the brain's surface
- Brain tumors (benign or cancerous)

In addition, many types of medication can interfere with memory. For example, some seniors experience forgetfulness when taking:

- Muscle relaxants
- Anti-anxiety medication
- Antidepressants
- Post-surgical pain medication
- Sleep aids
- Statins (for lowering cholesterol)
- Allergy or cold medication
- Anticholinergic drugs

Simply put, your physical health and mental well-being are closely linked. That's why it is so important to get screened for possible medical problems and ensure that you receive proper treatment for them. Also, make a commitment to lose weight if you're obese. And seek help to overcome any poor habits that can lead to health problems and memory loss, such as smoking, alcohol abuse, or drug addiction.

3. Keep Challenging Yourself

Mental stimulation is vital. But in order to improve your memory, you need to do more than what you are already good at. You need to keep learning new things. The more you challenge your brain, the more you can potentially enhance your memory. That's why so-called brain-training games and exercises often have only a narrow or short-lived impact. They may challenge you a little in the beginning, but as soon as you get the hang of them, your brain is no longer learning.

Ongoing challenge is what allows many seniors to maintain or enhance their overall memory. Their brains benefit greatly from learning, shaking things up, and pushing boundaries. So finding hobbies or activities that keep you challenged and mentally engaged is essential. But in order to stick with them, you also need to feel joy when you do them and have a clear path for building upon what you learn as your skills become more advanced. For example, a lot of older adults benefit from learning how to:

- Speak new languages
- Conduct genealogy research
- Play new musical instruments
- Cook gourmet meals
- Identify various species of plants or birds
- Code websites

The point is to move beyond your comfort zone and try things that are completely new to you. The more you do, the greater your chances of preventing memory decline and boosting your powers of recall. Don't worry about failing at any particular activity. The benefits are gained from the act of challenging yourself, not from achieving someone else's idea of success. Do things at your own pace so that you stay satisfied and motivated to keep learning.

4. Improve Your Sleep Habits

Quality nights of sleep are essential for the consolidation of our memories. So if you're having trouble remembering things, you may not be getting enough good sleep. Of course, it's true that many seniors and elderly people have difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep for a full night of rest (which is usually considered about seven to nine solid hours). But that doesn't mean those sleep problems are normal. In order to avoid sleep-related memory decline, you may need to prioritize good nights of rest and change some of your habits. Here are some things to try:

- Make your bedroom darker, quieter, cooler, less cluttered, and more comfortable.
- Dim the lights at least an hour before bedtime.
- Stick to a consistent sleep schedule. (Wake up and go to bed at the same times every day.)
- Adjust your bedtime schedule to align with when you actually feel sleepy.
- Reduce or eliminate your consumption of caffeine, especially after noon.
- Avoid drinking alcohol in the few hours leading up to bedtime.
- Turn off the TV, computer, and any other backlit screen-based electronics an hour or more before bedtime.
- Go outside or enjoy a sunlit room during the day to get at least a couple hours of sunshine.
- Wear earplugs or sleep in a separate room if your significant other has a snoring problem.

Following many of the other tips in this article can also lead to higher-quality sleep. For example, treating your health problems, adjusting your medications, reducing stress, watching what you eat, and getting regular exercise can all contribute to better nights of rest.

5. Change Your Mindset About Aging

How do you feel about getting older? Do you ever buy into the false notion that everyone "loses their marbles" as they age? Even if you don't consciously believe such incorrect stereotypes, your subconscious may still be receiving harmful and outdated messages about what it means to be a senior. That can lead to an underlying sense of anxiety about your future and contribute to memory problems.

But you have the power to shift that narrative. Tell yourself every day that you are a capable and thriving human being. Pay less attention to the number of years you've been alive and more attention to what you still want to learn and experience. If you believe you can do something, you'll stand a better chance of achieving it. That includes boosting your memory.

6. Remove Distractions and Sources of Stress

Mental strain and emotional tension can act as major barriers to the creation and retrieval of memories. That's especially true if you are chronically distracted or stressed out. After all, your brain can only process so much information at any one time. When your cognitive load is bigger than your brain's ability to handle it, you can't learn or consolidate new knowledge as effectively. So if you want to prevent memory loss and enjoy better powers of recall, you need to do whatever you can to minimize stress and distractions. For example:

- Do just one thing at a time instead of multitasking.

- Opt for a slower pace if you've been mindlessly rushing from one activity to the next.
- Pay close attention to each new piece of information you want to remember for at least 10 seconds.
- Let people know how you feel instead of keeping your emotions hidden.
- Meditate and take more frequent breaks, especially if your days are filled with nearly constant activity.
- Learn how to say no when you feel you need some downtime.
- Limit the amount of time you spend online since the Internet is full of distractions and may wire your brain to constantly crave new diversions, even of the meaningless or unimportant variety.

7. Take Time to Do Absolutely Nothing

Do you ever just let your mind wander freely, without consciously trying to think about anything in particular? It turns out that this kind of wakeful rest can have a positive effect on your memory, especially if it occurs after a period of learning.⁵ By taking at least 10 or 15 minutes to avoid any kind of activity or deliberate mental effort, your mind can more efficiently consolidate the information you learned and store it in your long-term memory. It's similar to what happens when you sleep. The key is to get this mental recharge in a quiet place without distractions or interruptions.

8. Get Frequent Exercise

Many physicians like to say that if something is good for your heart, then it is probably good for your brain as well. That's why physical exercise is often linked to better brain health. By regularly doing activities that increase your heart rate and get your blood pumping more quickly, you can boost the amount of oxygen your brain receives. And that may lead to memory improvements and other cognitive benefits. It will also lower your risk of getting certain diseases that can cause memory loss.

9. Socialize and Have Fun

Being socially isolated is a known risk factor for memory decline. So making time to visit with friends, family, or anyone else you care about on a regular basis may be more important than you realize. After all, humans are naturally social creatures. Our brains are wired for communication and relationships. When you interact with other people in a positive way, you reap cognitive benefits. And when you laugh and engage in fun activities, you can maximize those benefits. That's why mentally sharp seniors often find opportunities to socialize and have fun by doing things such as:

- Joining clubs based on interests like reading, gardening, or doing crafts
- Making friends with other people who have a great sense of humor
- Hosting creative parties based on funny themes
- Traveling or going on fun day outings with joyful people
- Playing games

- Volunteering

10. Consider Dietary Changes

Good nutrition is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle and, of course, a healthy brain. But this subject requires a disclaimer. After all, opinions vary greatly on what constitutes "good" nutrition. That's because scientific studies about nutrition often contradict each other and lead to unjustified hype or stigmatizing of particular foods or nutrients.

The problem is that many kinds of nutritional studies are inherently prone to statistical error and sloppy analysis, making them difficult or impossible to draw firm conclusions from. (They often rely on food questionnaires or diaries in which study participants have to track, remember, or self-report exactly what they've eaten over a certain period of time, which is far more difficult than you might imagine. People often lie about their diets or have trouble remembering or tracking what they've consumed.)⁶ Plus, many studies are funded by particular segments of the agricultural industry that have a vested interest in only promoting results that are in their favor. So, as a society, we frequently give more credence to nutritional studies than they actually merit.

All of that being said, most registered dietitians seem to agree that the best diet for a healthy brain and body is one that is based on:

- A colorful variety of fruits and vegetables
- Lean sources of protein
- Healthy fats (such as extra virgin olive oil)
- Whole (unrefined) grains

When it comes to protecting your memory, many experts also recommend drinking plenty of water and minimizing your consumption of fried foods, red meat, refined sugars, and heavily processed foods as much as possible. Having no more than one glass of red wine per day may also help. Here are a few other specific examples of foods that may provide memory or cognitive benefits:

- Cherries, blackberries, and blueberries
- Kale, spinach, and other dark leafy greens
- Coffee (in moderation)
- Dark chocolate (with at least 60-percent cocoa)
- Almonds and walnuts
- Pumpkin seeds
- Cabbage
- Broccoli
- Avocados
- Turmeric

11. Be Careful With Supplements

Unless you are medically deficient in something, it's probably better to get your vitamins and minerals from food (or, in the case of vitamin D, from sunshine) than from supplements. After all, do you really want to waste money on pills that aren't proven to work (and may be harmful)? When it comes to brain health and memory, the science is still very young. A huge amount of research is still needed before neuroscientists can definitively say that any specific supplements are safe and effective for boosting memory.

So, for the time being, it is buyer beware. All kinds of "memory enhancers" continue to be marketed to seniors based on false or flimsy evidence. The makers of memory supplements often wrap their claims in medical-sounding jargon or even cite studies that supposedly prove their credibility. But, in most cases, those claims don't hold up under closer scientific scrutiny. So always stay skeptical. Unless your own physician is recommending a particular supplement, you should probably save your money.

Remember: "Natural" doesn't necessarily equal safe or effective. In the U.S., supplement manufacturers don't receive much, if any, public oversight. That means a lot of people are buying pills, powders, and other types of supplements that don't contain what they say, have inconsistent amounts of ingredients, or even include dangerous substances that aren't on the label. Plus, if you take any medications, you risk experiencing negative effects from interactions between the drugs you're on and the supplements you're taking.

Simply put, supplements for memory require a lot more study and oversight. They're a gamble. That said, many seniors are willing to take chances on them. Below are a few examples of supplements that some people believe can help protect or enhance their memory. (**Always consult with your doctor and pharmacist before taking a new supplement.**)

- Omega-3 fatty acids
- Vitamin E
- Vitamin B12
- Curcumin
- Ginkgo biloba
- Caffeine
- Asian ginseng
- Bacopa monnieri
- Alpha-GPC
- Huperzine A
- DHEA
- Acetyl-l-carnitine

Are You Doing Enough to Keep Your Mind and Memory Sharp?

If you're concerned about your memory, help is clearly available. You and your doctor may be able to develop a plan for protecting or improving your brain health without spending a lot of money. So stay positive about your future and know that the mind you want might be achievable with just a few simple adjustments to your current lifestyle.