

## Exercise benefits the brain

by Juliet Boyd, Downtown Seattle YMCA

It's no surprise that exercise is good for your heart, but recent studies show that regular activity also benefits the brain.

Increasing the amount of physical activity you do — even by a few minutes each day — can have a direct improvement on brain growth and cognitive function. Experts say that the health benefits of exercise can be achieved in 30 minutes per day, even when done in blocks of 10 minutes at a time. Many daily tasks, such as gardening, household chores and walking the dog, also provide benefits. If you engage in these activities, you are already promoting brain growth.

So, how does exercise affect the brain? As we age, some connections in the brain are lost. New ones can be made but if we lose more connections than we make, our ability to function, both mentally and physically, declines. Exercise promotes brain growth and helps increase connections, which staves off age-related memory loss and may even prevent dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Specific effects of exercise on the brain include increased blood flow, balanced insulin levels and more activity in the brain's neurons.

The best way to begin regular exercise is to start small. When I meet with members at the YMCA, we create a plan based on each individual's goals. If you are not active, check with your doctor before beginning an exercise program. Drink plenty of fluids and be sure to include time for warm up and cool down.

### Walking

Walking is a weight-bearing activity that is good for your heart, muscles and bones. Even if you walk in 10-minute bursts, you can reap the benefits of walking.

## Stretching

Stretching elongates the muscles, increasing blood flow throughout the body, including to the brain. Before stretching, warm up with gentle movements or a walk. Relax, breathe freely and try to hold each stretch for 20 seconds. I recommend flexibility training at least twice per week.

## Strength Training

The number one way to prevent and combat osteoporosis, and promote brain growth, is to do strength training. The benefits of strength training can be achieved by engaging in a full-body routine twice per week. Breathe freely and move slowly through your exercises. Following is an exercise to try at home:

**Chair Raises:** Find a chair that, when you are seated, allows your knees to be at a 90-degree angle and your feet to be flat on the floor. Place the weight of your body on your heels and rise forward out of the chair to a standing position with your back straight. You may use your arms or keep them to the side for an extra challenge. Repeat this move 10 times.

Armed with practical advice on how to start a simple exercise routine, you can begin your journey toward improving your memory to help you stay mentally sharp. Go to [www.seattlemca.org](http://www.seattlemca.org) to learn more about the YMCA of Greater Seattle.

