

## A PILL ISN'T THE ANSWER

I work in a memory clinic. Every day someone calls; a spouse, a daughter or even a patient, asking about some new pill they read about or saw on the news. The story they refer to says this pill is going to change everything.....

One of our greatest fears of aging is the possibility of losing our mind to a disease such as Alzheimer's. All of us envision a long, healthy life with a sound mind and the ability to care for ourselves. Yet, what do we do to achieve that goal? Do we assume that when the time comes, a pill will provide a cure?

Alzheimer's is a disease that slowly destroys brain tissue causing loss of memory and eventually the ability to drink, eat and move. The damage is done by plaques and tangles. Plaques are sticky patches of protein that interrupt the brain's ability to connect with other areas. Tangles form within the brain's nerve fibers that send signals. Everyone forms these to some degree. On autopsy a pathologist will ask, "Was this patient demented?" to determine if Alzheimer's should be listed as a finding. The question scientists are asking is what makes some people develop Alzheimer's and others continue to function normally?

Studies are now showing that successful aging requires a multi-faceted approach. It combines active learning, socialization and healthy habits. The following are few of the recommendations I give to patients and families (as well as practice myself).

1. **Never stop learning!** Henry Ford said, "Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young." We used to believe that it was impossible to learn something new as we aged. Now science has shown that the pace of learning changes, retention is improved. Take a class, learn a poem, practice speaking a different language, learn to bake, garden or dance. The list is endless.
2. **Read!** Mark Twain said, "The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them." Reading is exercise for the brain. There is a wealth of material out there for everyone's taste. Fantasy, love, horror, science fiction, literature, biographies, history... The key is finding something that interests you. Try to make reading magazines or newspapers a habit.
3. **Do something different!** Charles Dickens said, "Minds, like bodies, will often fall into a pimply, ill-conditioned state from mere excess of comfort." As life goes on, we tend to develop patterns. The same grocery store, the same bank, the same restaurant, the same vacation. Some familiarity is good, but continual familiarity becomes monotonous. Make a list of things you've never done and start acting on it. Include some simple things like trying a different cuisine or a new vegetable, and some more complex things such as traveling somewhere new. Keep a journal of your adventures and add to your list as new ideas occur.
4. **Turn off the TV!** "The majority of people waste virtually every evening and weekend on trivia"-Dr. Walter Doyle Staples. Television can be entertaining,

- educational and informative. It can also keep you from participating in life. Limit it to three to four hours a day maximum.
5. **Keep moving!** “Exercise can preserve something of our early strength even into old age”-Cicero. Exercise improves heart and lung function, reduces the levels of stress hormones and promotes release of endorphins-our bodies natural “feel good” chemicals. Find something you love to do—walk, dance, or swim. Play tennis, basketball, or golf. Ride a bike. Take an exercise class. Make a pledge to move every day. Vary your routines. Find a buddy to offer encouragement.
  6. **Control your blood pressure!** “A man is as old as his arteries”-Henry Cazalis. High blood pressure is the number one predictor of a shortened life span, and more importantly, one of less quality. Hypertension, as it is known, causes heart disease, stroke and kidney damage. It also is the cause of vascular dementia, the second most common form of memory loss. There are new guidelines for blood pressure management with the ideal number around 125/75. Talk to your health care provider about getting blood pressure under control and monitor it regularly.
  7. **Limit alcohol!** “Long quaffing maketh a short life”-John Lyly. Alcohol is toxic to the brain. Many people use alcohol to ease stress, help them relax, or out of habit. Drinking before bedtime can help someone sleep as it is a depressant but will cause wakefulness in the early morning hours as the body breaks down the sugars. Alcohol can be beneficial to the heart but is not to the liver, pancreas, esophagus, stomach, immune system and bone marrow. Limit consumption to 5 ounces of wine daily, 12 ounces of beer or 2 ounces of liquor for the best long term health.
  8. **Chase a new challenge!** W. Somerset Maugham said, “When I was young, I was amazed at Plutarch’s statement that the elder Cato began at the age of 80 to learn Greek. I am amazed no longer. Old age is ready to undertake tasks that you shirked because they would take too long.” You are never too old to take up something new. Some prime examples:
    - a. Anna Mary (Grandma) Moses began her painting career at 76 when arthritis made it too painful to do needlework.
    - b. Marian Hartley flew a single engine plane in a solo transatlantic flight when she was 84.
    - c. Frank Lloyd Wright completed the Guggenheim museum in New York when he was 91.
    - d. Bertrand Russell formed a nuclear disarmament group at age 88.
    - e. Albert Schweitzer treated patients at his hospital in Gabon from age 84 to 90.

Successful aging, and indeed preservation of a sound memory does not come from a pill. Rather it is the combination of action, health and medicine that do the most effective work.

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Quotes from “Successful Aging” by Mary O’Brian, MD, Biomed Books, 2005