

## 8 SIMPLE TIPS FOR BETTER BRAIN HEALTH

### Why is it important to focus on brain health?

The cognitive difficulties that can occur in people living with HIV are likely related to several factors. While some are not fully understood, we already know that others can be changed for the better. General measures to optimize brain health may go a long way to preserving and improving cognitive function.

Evidence shows that what is good for the

body is also good for the brain. A healthy lifestyle, including engaging in stimulating activities, eating well, exercising regularly, managing stress and limiting problematic foods and drinks can help promote brain health.

Take a look at the **8 tips** in this document. These are tips that anyone can use, but only you know what is most important and relevant to your own life.

Begin by choosing just **one** area where

you think you could start making a difference today. Check out the recommended website or call the number provided for more information on what to do and how to get started. Set yourself a realistic goal and give it a try for just a week or two. You may be surprised by how easy it is to build a healthier brain starting right now.



Nicotine is a powerful drug that changes the brain as well as the body. While nicotine improves mood and energy within seconds, this soon subsides leaving smokers feeling tired and "down", in turn fueling the craving for another cigarette. Smoking also has negative effects on brain blood flow, reducing how much oxygen gets to the brain, and increasing the risk of brain damage from stroke.

It's never too late to stop smoking and enjoy the health benefits that will follow. After just two days of not smoking, brain function begins to improve, and stroke risk drops.

Visit the Canadian Cancer Society's website ([www.smokershelpline.ca](http://www.smokershelpline.ca)) for tools to help you quit smoking or call their smokers' helpline toll free at 1-877 513-5333.

Visit <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/tobac-tabac/quit-cesser/index-eng.php> or <http://www.catie.ca/en/catienews/2011-11-08/understanding-tobacco-addiction> for more information on the effects of smoking.

**If you will only make one of the changes suggested here, this should be the one!**

## 2. CHALLENGE YOUR MIND

Do mentally challenging activities each day. Play cards or board games with friends. Do puzzles and crosswords to keep your thinking sharp. Nurture creative thinking through hobbies and crafts. Learn a new language or take up line dancing!

Visit <http://www.catie.ca/en/fact-sheets/other-health-conditions/hiv-and-brain> or <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/About-dementia/About-the-brain/Brain-health> for more ways to stimulate your mind.

In the short term, alcohol can result in trouble walking, slowed reaction times, poor sleep, and memory problems. Over time, drinking large amounts of alcohol results in permanent brain damage and limits the growth of new brain cells. Women may be especially at risk.

Some studies have suggested small amounts of alcohol might benefit brain function (e.g., 125 ml wine daily), but regular alcohol consumption also raises the risk of problems like high blood pressure, some cancers, and stroke. If you chose to drink, limit consumption to no more than 2 drinks for men and 1 drink for women per day.

Cannabis, opiates, and stimulants can all lead to cognitive difficulties.

Learn more about the effects of alcohol and street drugs consumption at: <http://www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/managing-your-health/4> or <http://www.cpha.ca/en/portals/substance/health.aspx>



## 4. MOVE YOUR BODY

Brain health is directly tied to physical health and can improve with exercise. Be active. You can improve your health with as little as 2.5 hours of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity each week, broken into sessions of 10 minutes or more. Get stronger by adding strengthening activities such as push-ups, leg squats and abdominal crunches that target your muscles and bones at least two days per week.

The best effects on brain health are seen when aerobic and strength training are combined.

Visit: <http://www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/managing-your-health/4#exercise>, <http://www.catie.ca/en/treatmentupdate/treatmentupdate-186/hiv-brain/exercise-found-improve-memory> or [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/07paap-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/07paap-eng.php) for ways to get active.



Your brain is very active during sleep. A good night's sleep helps improve memory and the ability to learn new information. To sleep well, it's important to follow a regular sleep schedule. Develop a consistent routine and go to bed at the same time every day. Avoid naps during the day that can make it harder to fall asleep at night.

Limit stimulants like coffee, cola and even chocolate, and try avoiding them entirely after 4 pm. Avoid eating large meals or exercising close to bedtime.

Talk with your doctor if you have trouble falling asleep, wake too early in the morning, sleep too much for two weeks or more or if your sleep is chronically poor. Loud snoring may also be a sign of more serious sleep disorders that may need medical treatment.

Learn more about health sleep habits at:

<http://www.catie.ca/en/positiveside/winter-2013/sleep-tight>

## 6. MANAGE STRESS AND NEGATIVE MOODS

You can't eliminate stress, but you can learn to identify sources of stress and respond to stressful situations in healthier ways. Learn to reduce your stress by setting realistic goals and managing your time effectively.

Deep breathing and other relaxation techniques, mindfulness meditation, and physical activity can help quiet the body and the mind. Yoga and other mind-body activities may be especially good ways to promote mental and physical relaxation.

Anxiety and depression will definitely affect your memory and your ability to think clearly. Speak with your healthcare provider if you feel anxious or sad most of the time for two or more weeks. Effective treatments include regular physical activity, short-term talk therapy or medication.

Learn more about managing stress and negative moods at:

<http://www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/emotional-wellness>  
or <http://www.cmha.ca/mental-health/>

## 7. EAT A HEALTHY DIET RICH IN FRUITS



Nutritious foods that are healthy for your heart are also good for your brain. Protect brain health with foods high in antioxidants like spinach, kale, broccoli, red peppers, berries, cold water fish like salmon, and almonds.

Limit foods high in fat and cholesterol. Bake or grill instead of frying. Use olive oil instead of butter.

Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Water is the ideal way to add fluids without increasing calories.

Learn more about healthy eating at: <http://www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/managing-your-health/4#eating>, <http://www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/nutrition> or <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>

## 8. REVIEW YOUR MEDICINES WITH YOUR DOCTOR

Many medicines, including drugs prescribed for heart conditions, antihistamines, certain diabetic medications, muscle relaxants, antacids, and antidepressants, along with some over-the-counter drugs, can negatively affect memory and thinking.

Ask your health care provider to review the medicines you are taking to minimize cognitive side effects. Speak up right away if you notice new medications are leading to more problems with memory or thinking.