

BOOST YOUR BRAIN – Dr Helena Popovic MBBS



Neuroscientists have discovered more about the brain during the 21st century than in all previous centuries combined. This means our knowledge of the brain has exploded and the information is life-changing for each and every one of us.

We now know that our brains are constantly changing in response to what we do, what we think and how we feel. One fifth of all the nutrients in the food we eat go to the brain to supply it with essential raw materials that affect our mood, thought processes and decision-making skills. That's why diet is an important factor in brain health.

Every time we engage in any sort of **physical exercise**, we produce a multitude of chemicals that improve brain function, stimulate the growth of new brain cells, increase connections between existing brain cells and elevate our mood. So lace up your runners and get moving. Half an hour of exercise a day cuts the risk of dementia in half.

Whenever we solve a problem, overcome an obstacle or bounce back from depression, we raise our IQ and increase our brain cell count. Every time we attempt something new – whether we master it or not – we sharpen our brains and keep dementia at bay. Lifelong active **learning** also halves the risk of developing dementia.

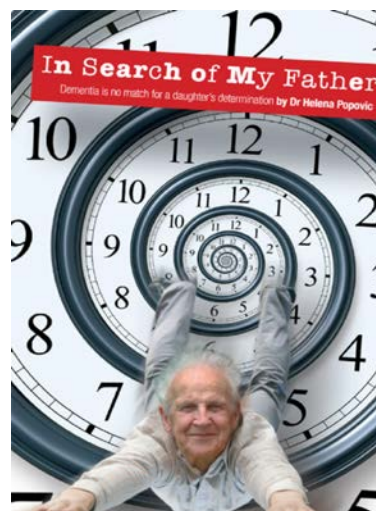
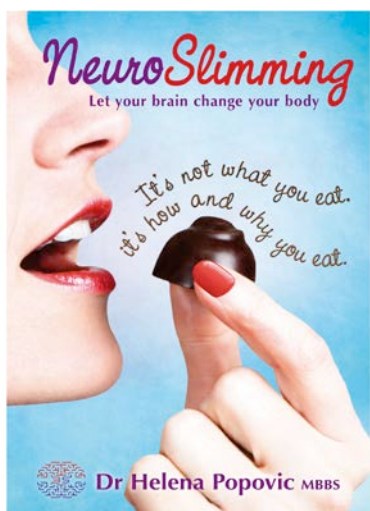
A good night's **sleep** helps to preserve memory, consolidates previous learning, enhances our capacity to make sound decisions, builds up our resilience to stress and strengthens our immune system. After 17 hours of wakefulness (for example from 7am to midnight) the brain operates as though we had a blood alcohol reading of 0.05% – above the legal limit for driving!

Meaningful social connections are essential in keeping the brain healthy – loneliness doubles the risk of developing cognitive problems and dementia. Conversely, feeling that

we make a positive contribution to the lives of others boosts our immune function and our brain health. **Optimism** enhances creativity, problem solving skills and overall health and wellbeing.

On the other hand, smoking, binge drinking, chronic stress, sleep deprivation, junk food, a diet high in sugar and trans fats, loneliness and depression all significantly increase the risk of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease (the commonest type of dementia in developed countries like Australia and the USA). Stress causes the body to release high levels of cortisol, which actually destroys brain cells and prevents the brain from laying down new memories and accessing old ones. So if you want to recall something, the best thing you can do is relax!

About 1700 new cases of dementia are diagnosed in Australia every week, adding to the 350 000 people already suffering from the disease. Most cases of dementia are not hereditary and until now we didn't realise that our daily habits and lifestyle choices had such a profound impact on the functioning of the brain. We are not passive victims of our genes. Mental decline as we age is not inevitable. We can actually build up what is known as 'cognitive reserve' to help keep our brains in excellent working order for the duration of our lives. There isn't any one thing that will guarantee a person remains free of dementia. But I hope that by reading my books and subscribing to my free fortnightly Brain-e-Bytes you will learn enough to tip the scales in your favour so that your brain remains sharp and healthy all the days of your life.



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