



Can brain games ward off brain drain?

THE LATEST CRAZE for boomers: brain games for cognitive fitness. But can these computer games really ward off brain drain? “Healthy skepticism is in order,” says Gary Kennedy, M.D., director of geriatric psychiatry at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. “That’s not to say that they’re a waste of money, but it’s not likely that they’ll have a lasting effect.”

Any intellectually challenging pursuit can reduce your risk of developing dementia and help you achieve tip-top mental functioning, Kennedy argues, no matter how old you are.

And although dementia is associated with age, it’s not a normal part of aging. In fact, he says, if you don’t have it by the time you reach 85, then your risk actually decreases. The brain is like a computer, and it does slow down with age, but mostly because of illness or inactivity, Kennedy says.

Some steps to take for a healthy brain:

■ Engage in physical activity that raises your heart rate but allows you to carry on a conversation.

■ Find a playmate to increase your likelihood of sticking with your exercises; stay connected to others via a healthy social life.

■ Learn, study and read. Research shows that education has a protective effect on the brain.

■ Play chess, do crossword puzzles, solve jumbles — any challenging, non-repetitive intellectual exercise will do. (Try USA WEEKEND’s Frame Games.) Make sure it’s something you enjoy so you’ll keep doing it.

■ Skip the high-fat diet. “What’s good for the heart is good for the brain,” Kennedy says. **W**

— By Susan T. Lennon

Help to soothe your teen's migraine



PARENTS: If throbbing headaches disrupt your teen's life, the problem could be migraines, which affect about 10% of boys and 20% of girls, according to pediatric neurologist Kenneth J. Mack, Ph.D.

An upset stomach is often a symptom of a migraine headache, Mack says, and your teen also might be avoiding light, loud noises and certain odors, and desiring to sleep in a dark room.

The pain can be debilitating. But you can help.

"The body of a migraine person likes routine," says Mack, who is also associate professor of neurology at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine. "It likes to get enough sleep, food, relaxation and exercise."

Ask your teen to follow Mack's advice. Managing migraines means she might reduce her risk of developing anxiety and depression, and improve her overall functioning.

TREATMENT TIPS:

■ For best effect, take an appropriate dose of medicine at the first sign of headache pain (over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatories or prescription triptans). "Pain begets pain," Mack says. "The longer you let the headache go on, the harder it is to control."

■ Ask your doctor about prevention to reduce the frequency: Over-the-counter daily riboflavin (vitamin B-2) helps about 50% of people who try it. Prescription remedies also are available.

■ Beware rebound headaches: Taking pain medicine more than twice a week for several weeks in a row can cause the body to become used to it, and going off can cause the body to crave it, Mack says. This puts people at risk for headaches. Talk to your doctor about going on a preventive medicine.

■ Techniques such as biofeedback and visual imagery can help those migraine sufferers who use them regularly. **W**