

What is a Healthy Brain? New Research Explores Perceptions of Cognitive Health Among Diverse Older Adults



Cognitive health is a major factor in ensuring the quality of life of older adults and preserving their independence. To explore how diverse older adults think about “cognitive health and cognitive decline,” the Healthy Aging Research Network, a group of nine universities supported by the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) Healthy Aging Program, conducted a series of group interviews across the United States. This research, identified in The Healthy Brain Initiative: A National Public Health Road Map to Maintaining Cognitive Health (www.cdc.gov/aging) as a priority area, was designed to gain insights into how people view cognitive health and how to maintain it. The findings will

be used to further the development of effective public health messages to promote cognitive health in older adults across the nation. Between 2005 and 2007, researchers conducted 55 focus groups with over 450 participants from nine states. The diverse participants included older adults (some of whom were experiencing cognitive impairment), individuals caring for family or friends experiencing cognitive impairment, healthcare providers, residents of rural and urban areas, speakers of English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Vietnamese, African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic whites. Several key themes emerged from the focus groups.

What is cognitive health?

A healthy brain is one that can perform all the mental processes that are collectively known as cognition, including the ability to learn new things, intuition, judgment, language, and remembering.

Race and ethnicity can influence how we define a healthy brain.

- People from many diverse racial and ethnic groups shared a common language and a core set of beliefs about what comprises a healthy brain. They most often describe cognitive health as “staying sharp” or being “right in the mind” and define it as living to an advanced age, having good physical health, having a positive mental outlook, being alert, having a good memory, and being socially involved.
- Participants also identified areas where their specific ethnic, cultural, or geographic group may be unique in terms of how cognitive health is defined.
- Researchers found differences among the groups in terms of how participants discussed specific issues such as independent living, older adults and driving, the importance of playing games or puzzles, and the effects of “good genes.”

Older adults believe that physical activity can protect cognitive health but are often less clear on the role nutrition can play.

- Participants in all groups believed that physical activity, particularly walking, promotes cognitive health, but they were unsure about the frequency, duration, and intensity of walking that would be required to achieve benefits.

- A wide range of healthy physical activities were cited, including Tai Chi, gardening, and housekeeping. However, strength training, which has numerous benefits for older adults (such as improved bone density and decreased risk of falling), was seldom mentioned by any of the groups.
- Many participants acknowledged difficulty translating their knowledge of what they “should” do into healthy actions.
- Participants also believed there is a link between diet and cognitive health, but they were more skeptical about this link than they were about the link between physical activity and cognitive health. There was also considerable variability among groups about what they considered a “healthy” diet; some focused more on moderation and portion size, others on foods that should be avoided.
- Most participants said that fruits, vegetables, and lean meats are good for the brain, but did not identify specific dietary changes, and many expressed confusion over the role of dietary supplements.

“First in staying sharp is exercising, the second is diet, and the third is being active in society. Go often, participate often ...”
~by a participant



Findings can guide development of better messages

Regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, language, or geographic region, older adults who participated in the group interviews agreed that cognitive health—memory, decision-making, and similar functions—is important to healthy aging.

- Participants shared their views on ways to maintain a healthy lifestyle, including physical activity, a healthy diet, social involvement, participation in enjoyable activities, a positive mental attitude, spiritual activities, and accepting and adapting to physical and cognitive changes.

Participants also provided many creative and useful ideas that could be used to develop effective public health messages about cognitive health.

- Their suggestions reflected racial and ethnic diversity. African Americans, for example, linked cognitive health to spiritual health, while Chinese and Vietnamese participants felt that a healthy body and a healthy brain go together. White participants emphasized that no matter what your age you can still be healthy and happy.
- Health messages that build on existing perceptions, use cognitive health as a motivator for healthy behaviors, and involve “community champions” as advocates were viewed positively by these groups.

Media messages are rare and often conflicting.

- Participants reported hearing little about cognitive health in the mass media, with most information coming from print media. Although most participants watched a lot of television, they reported little or no information about cognitive health coming from this source.
- All groups expressed a distrust of media messages regarding cognitive health, and felt that conflicting and changing messages contribute to confusion about the media’s promotion of health.
- Social networks and educational programs were identified as more effective ways to reach people with messages about cognitive health, particularly within pre-existing social networks such as clubs or senior centers.

*“I don’t know if there’s anything left that really they [the media] know is healthy for you.”
~by a participant*

Overall, the findings suggest that messages about cognitive health should be tailored to specific communities and cultural subgroups, and that existing media messages are often conflicting. Researchers will continue to examine these issues to better inform the public about the evolving science of maintaining cognitive health and preventing cognitive impairment.

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RESOURCES

To learn more about this research, see the special issue of *The Gerontologist: Promoting Cognitive Health in Diverse Populations of Older Adults* (Volume 49, Number S1, June 2009).

A good general resource for consumers is NIHSeniorHealth, an easy-to-use website from the National Institutes of Health that features health and wellness information for older adults.

(<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/>)

To learn more about CDC’s Healthy Brain Initiative contact:

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