

Exercise and diet key can slow memory loss

Active lifestyle and fish-rich meals are key to healthy aging, study finds

DUBLIN - An active lifestyle and a healthy, fish-rich diet are not only good for your heart, they may also help tackle the memory loss associated with old age, two leading neuroscientists said on Wednesday.

As people live longer, finding ways of halting the decline in mental agility is becoming increasingly important, said Professor Ian Robertson, director of the Institute of Neuroscience at Trinity College Dublin.

"The biggest threat to being able to function well and properly is our brains," he told journalists at the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Dublin.

"There is very strong evidence, particularly in the over-50s, that the degree to which you maintain your mental faculties depends on a handful of quite simple environmental factors," he said, having identified seven key areas.

Those who remained physically fit, avoided high stress levels and enjoyed a rich and varied social life are better equipped to stay alert as they age. Mental stimulation, learning new things and simply thinking young also help.

A new survey compiled for the University of Kent and the charity Age Concern showed ageism was rife in Britain where people, on average, see youth as ending at 49 and old age beginning at 65.

But Robertson said such attitudes were not helpful given the number of 80-year-olds who remain "sharp as pins."

"If you start to think of yourself as old when you are 60, which is no longer justified, you will behave old," he said.

Good for your brain

Research conducted by his Trinity College colleague Professor Marina Lynch showed healthy eating was another key requirement for staying on the ball, according to Robertson.

Lynch said new research showed fish oils may reduce the cell inflammation that triggers a decline in memory.

"Studies have identified the anti-inflammatory properties as well as the restorative qualities of omega-3," she said of the essential fatty acid found in supplements like cod liver oil and fatty fish such as mackerel, salmon and tuna.

Already believed to protect the brain against the damage caused by Alzheimer's disease, omega-3 has also been linked with maintaining healthy hearts and joints.

Lynch said the biggest surprise of the latest discovery was that omega-3 appeared not only to replace anti-inflammatories that dwindle with age but also to stem a corresponding rise in chemicals that cause the cell inflammation in the first place.

"These effects seem to cobble together to restore the ability of people to maintain memory as they grow older," she said, pointing to a study by the University of Aberdeen showing a diet rich in fatty fish slowed the brain's aging process.