

# DITCH

YOUR

# brain drain

You probably already know that poor nutrition and lack of exercise can wreak havoc on your body, but did you know your brain also takes a beating from bad habits? Give your noggin a nudge by swapping five bad habits for five healthy ones and watch your cognitive power grow. **LISA EVANS** explains.

## HABIT

### Skipping breakfast

#### HOW IT HURTS YOU

Avoiding breakfast causes blood sugar to plummet, starving the brain of essential nutrients and causing premature brain degeneration. The brain soaks up 20% of the energy you feed your body. "Breakfast wakes up your brain," says Dr. John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist and author of *Brain Rules*.

#### MAKE CHANGE TODAY

The brain is made up of 60% fat. Since it can't manufacture certain fats like omega 3 fatty acids, they must be supplemented by your diet. Try adding avocado or flaxseed to a morning smoothie.

## HABIT

### Being a night owl

#### HOW IT HURTS YOU

There's a reason we need to "sleep on a problem." "As you enter into sleep, your brain begins reactivating the things you learned during the course of the day and repeats them thousands of times during the night," says Dr. Medina. Depriving your brain of sleep reduces its ability to recall information, reducing problem-solving abilities and causing memory to decline.

#### MAKE CHANGE TODAY

Skip the afternoon coffee and take a nap instead. "A nap will recharge your brain and allow you to perform better on intellectual tasks," says Dr. Medina.

## HABIT

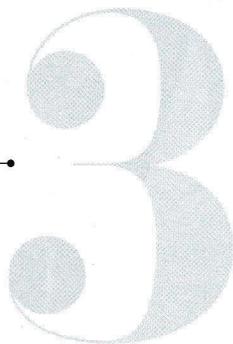
### Social isolation

#### HOW IT HURTS YOU

A lack of social connections increases your risk of neurological diseases. A recent study in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* found that individuals who reported feeling lonely were 64% more likely to develop dementia. But not all social connections are equal, says Dr. Amen. While surrounding ourselves with loving relationships can boost the brain's cognitive abilities, hanging around individuals who are stressful may have the opposite effect.

#### MAKE CHANGE TODAY

Connect to your community by volunteering, or join an organized group such as a book club or a bowling league – anything that allows you to enjoy an activity in the company of others.



## HABIT

### Smoking

#### HOW IT HURTS YOU

In addition to prematurely aging the skin, smoking cigarettes damages blood vessels in the brain. A 2012 study published in the journal *Age and Ageing* showed that smokers over age 50 had lower cognitive performance than non-smokers on tests of memory, verbal fluency and attention. "Smoking constricts blood flow to the brain, [choking it] of oxygen," says Dr. Daniel Amen, author of *Use Your Brain to Change Your Age*.

#### MAKE CHANGE TODAY

Talk to your doctor about how to quit smoking – there are many helpful options available – and replace this bad habit with a healthy brain habit that keeps your hands occupied, such as playing board games or doing puzzles. Or, swap your smoke break for a fitness break. Research shows just 15 minutes of aerobic exercise triggers changes within the brain that defuse nicotine cravings.

## HABIT

### Sedentary lifestyle

#### HOW IT HURTS YOU

"Our brains developed under conditions of constant motion," says Dr. Medina. Aerobic exercise increases blood flow to areas of the brain critical for learning and strengthens the neurons residing in those same regions. These effects are thought to be responsible for improvements in learning and memory. A report by the Ontario Brain Institute (OBI) showed one in seven cases of Alzheimer's could be prevented by moderate physical activity. The OBI suggests a minimum of five 30-minute walks per week. Physical activity can also help mitigate depression – a condition that is 10 times more common in Alzheimer's sufferers.

#### MAKE CHANGE TODAY

Start a lunch-hour walking club at your office. Not only will you get your half-hour of exercise but you'll be building your social connections, too. Even 10-minute bursts of aerobic exercise can change your brain. Some easy ways to achieve that include getting off the bus a few stops before your destination, parking in the farthest spot from your building and ditching the elevator for stairs. 🍃

