

Physical activity seems like the most promising thing you can do to keep your brain at its best, Henderson said.

The evidence comes mostly from observational studies rather than the randomized, controlled trials that are considered the gold standard, but it is consistent.

People who engage in aerobic activity — for instance, walking several times per week — show improvements in their cognitive function, particularly in their ability to switch quickly from task to task, Wagster said.

A few small clinical trials and some animal research also support the role of exercise in maintaining cognitive health, but the evidence is not definitive at this point, Henderson said.

Even so, exercise can help cut your risk of high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity, and these are known risk factors for developing dementia, according to Laurie Ryan, program director for Alzheimer's disease clinical trials at the NIA.

Clogged arteries and impaired

And medicines that seemed promising for slowing memory loss in old age — such as estrogen and anti-inflammatory drugs — seemed to do more harm than good, Naqvi's review found.

A study that appeared this year in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showed that high doses of a cocktail of vitamins that included folic acid, vitamin B6 and vitamin B12 slowed the atrophy of regions of the brain thought to be especially vulnerable to Alzheimer's disease.

But the benefits were seen only in participants who started the study with high blood levels of homocysteine, an amino acid linked to a higher risk of heart disease, which B vitamins are known to lower. This result suggests that the vitamins may not help people with healthy homocysteine levels.

Also, while the study was well designed and well controlled, it was very small, Ryan noted.

"We've seen over and over again that these small studies can look very good, but then they don't hold up in larger tri-

think are helping your brain, say the experts.

- Instead, eat a healthful diet and engage in social interactions and mentally challenging activities.

- And do some kind of regular aerobic activity — about 30 minutes, five days per week, according to Henderson.

These steps won't guarantee that you won't forget the name of that book you want to recommend to a friend, but they are unlikely to hurt.

If the prospect of inevitable memory decline seems depressing, know this: Some types of cognition improve with age. For instance, older adults outperform young people in vocabulary skills.

"It may be a reflection of wisdom. We're collecting information and experience and putting it together," Wagster said.

The idea that older people can't learn new things is a myth, Wagster argued.

"As we age, we may not learn something new quite as quickly, but we'll learn it and learn it well," she said.