How to keep your brain healthy in 2015 and beyond

By Fredrick Kunkle
December 31, 2014

Just in time for the New Year, a national campaign is under way to help educate caregivers and other members of the public about age-related threats to brain health and simple strategies to reduce those risks.

With surveys showing that mental acuity is among the top concerns of people over the age of 50, the Eldercare Locator -- a program backed by the federal government’s Administration for Community Living and managed by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging – has put out a brochure pulling together resources for maintaining one’s cognitive health.

The brochure, “Brain Health: You Can Make a Difference,” draws on research and recommendations developed by ACL with the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In conjunction with the campaign, we spoke with National Association of Area Agencies on Aging chief executive Sandy Markwood about some of the practical things people can do to stay mentally sharp. She also talked about debunking a few myths of aging and how to find resources for older Americans and their families.

Q: What’s the focus of your campaign?
“What our campaign was focused on is that you need to look holistically at health care. And brain health is part of your overall health. There are things you can do. You can’t control genes. You can’t control your environment. But your lifestyle is something that you can have control over and is really critical to your brain health and your overall physical health.

“So what we looked at are what are the practical things you can do to positively impact that. ... No matter what age we are, but particularly as you’re growing older, these are things that often get discounted, but quite the contrary, are things people should focus on.”

**Q: What above all is the most important thing to do?**

“I think you need to take charge of your health care. ... Talk to your [primary care] physician and your pharmacist about your health and your health care. ... talk to your doctor about the potential of diabetes [and] high blood pressure, your propensity for strokes and the like. Those are things you need to make sure you and your primary care physician are managing. ..."

“On the other hand, people often leave the pharmacist out of the equation. And as we grow older we take more medications because of those chronic diseases. And the issue becomes drug interactions can mimic a lot of symptoms of cognitive failure.

“And if you have questions, ask. If you get on a new medication and you don’t feel well, don’t assume that that’s okay.”

**Q: What else?**

“**Eat well.** Get active. Get moving. No matter how old you are, physical activity is critical. And it doesn’t have to be taking an exercise class. It can be walking for 10 minutes or 15 minutes a day. Do that twice a day – even better. ..."

And I think the other part of it is to stay engaged. There [are] activities and opportunities in every community for older adults, people across the life span, to stay engaged. We know that people who
volunteer have better physical health, have better mental health. And learning more, and learning new things, and staying engaged with people is just critical to people’s overall well-being. That helps your health, from the head up and from the neck down. . . And I think the other thing is, learn more -- learn new things.

**Q: What are some of the myths about maintaining or reversing cognitive decline?**

On the one side, that there’s [a myth that there’s] nothing you can do about it – that it’s inevitable. I think that you should always take control of what you can take control of. And if there are lifestyle changes that you can make that will make you healthier, you’d be remiss in not doing that. So take charge of what you can take charge of.

think the other thing is, there is also no silver bullet to being able to ward off dementia of any kind. But, again, do what you can [of] what the studies have shown that are helpful, which is have a healthy lifestyle.

**Q: You sounded doubtful about the role of crossword puzzles and other games to keep healthy. Can you elaborate?**

There’s been a lot of discussion out there about brain games. And now there’s studies out there saying they may not be as effective as possible. . . There’s been a lot of marketing around brain games that can improve your brain health. It can improve your ability to do games better.

[But] if you like them, and enjoy them, and find them stimulating, do it.

**Q: How is the campaign going so far?**

“At this point, this has been the most requested brochure we’ve had. . .It’s based on research and study in the field, and I think that’s critically important. This isn’t soothsayers. These are people who know the impact of the activities you should participate in to ensure better brain health. . .

“Bottom line is, this is something that everybody should plan for.”