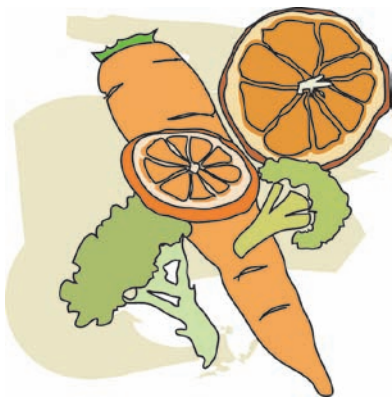


short takes

USABLE NEWS + TIPS BONNIE SCHIEDEL



food for thought

New year, new eating habits. “Make a few changes at a time,” advises Anar Jamal, a registered dietitian with the Calgary Health Region. “Remember that it takes 21 days to form a good habit — and that includes healthy eating.” Here are Jamal’s tips.

- ▶ Eat a dark green or orange vegetable at every meal (bright colour is a sign of disease-fighting plant chemicals).
- ▶ Invest in snack-size containers and fill them with easy-to-grab healthy snacks, such as cut-up fruit and veggies or nuts.
- ▶ Make a point of reading labels, and take note of the calories given for the portion sizes. The label on a can of juice, for example, often refers just to the calories in a 250-mL (8.5-fl-oz) serving whereas the whole can might contain almost double that.
- ▶ Choose meat alternatives more often. For example, add a can of white beans to your soup or sprinkle nuts on your yogourt.
- ▶ Visit eaTracker, a free Dietitians of Canada website that helps you to monitor your daily food and activity choices, and provides personalized feedback. Go to (www.eatracker.ca).

OBESITY HAMPERS PAP SMEAR TESTING

Fewer obese women may be getting screened for cervical cancer, say researchers at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Looking at the 2003 Canadian Community Health survey (134,042 participants), they found that heavier women were much less likely to get a Pap smear, despite being at an increased risk for cervical cancer. “We postulate that weight-related screening rates differed in Pap testing — but not in breast and colon cancer screenings — because of the role physicians play in the tests,” says study co-author Dr. Rebecca Mitchell, an endocrinologist. With mammography to detect breast cancer and fecal occult blood testing to detect colon cancer, a woman’s physician just requests the appropriate test., but pap smears are performed directly by the physician. “Pap testing in obese women may pose technical difficulties, requiring extra time and effort,” she says. “As well, obese women may be embarrassed to undergo the test, and it has been shown that physicians are reluctant to perform testing on reluctant patients.” If your doctor hasn’t scheduled you for a regular Pap smear, make sure you bring it up.

MOVE OF THE MONTH Sorting out sore muscles

Many a New Year’s resolution to get fit has been derailed by sore, stiff muscles after a few enthusiastic workouts. “Some soreness is perfectly normal, especially if you’re just starting out,” says Ashley Howatt, a certified fitness trainer in Halifax. “Don’t get discouraged.” Follow Howatt’s tips to keep muscle soreness at manageable levels.

1 After your workout, stretch every large muscle group for 20 to 30 seconds, not just five or 10. Do a steady, static stretch. Don’t bounce as bouncing damages muscle fibres.

2 About 30 minutes after a workout, have a small snack that’s rich in carbohydrates, such as an apple or a glass of milk, to help restore depleted glycogen (your muscles’ fuel). A recent Australian study published in *The Journal of Applied Physiology* found that consuming caffeine with the carbs helps to restore glycogen faster.

3 Get a good night’s sleep. This helps muscle fibres to regenerate.



ILLUSTRATION: CONNIE MORRIS; PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Itching for winter

Eczema is a common inflammation of the skin that causes red, itchy and sometimes painful swollen bumps. It affects 10% to 15% of Canadians, especially in the dry indoor conditions of winter.



Test your eczema knowledge. Answer true or false.

- 1 Eczema gets worse over time, so you should treat it aggressively from the outset.
- 2 People with eczema should *not* bathe daily to avoid depleting their skin of moisture.
- 3 Eczema is not contagious.

ANSWERS

- 1 **False** "Eczema tends to wax and wane," says Dr. Peter Vignjivic, a dermatologist in Hamilton, Ont. "Some cases tend to worsen without treatment, while others may resolve spontaneously without treatment." Talk to your doctor about the best course of action for you.
- 2 **False** In fact, if you suffer from eczema, you should bathe once a day in lukewarm water for just five minutes. Within three minutes of leaving the tub or shower and while your skin is still damp, liberally apply a heavy, non-fragranced, greasy moisturizer that contains ingredients such as petrolatum, mineral oil or glycerine to seal in moisture.
- 3 **True** You can't catch eczema from someone. You can, however, inherit a susceptibility to atopic dermatitis, the most common form of eczema.

Surgery helps older infertile men

Fifteen to 20% of Canadian men (and up to 40% of infertile men) have a varicocele, a clump of enlarged veins in the scrotum. "The dilated veins raise the temperature of the blood in the testicles, which can reduce sperm production and quality," says Dr. Armand Zini, a Montreal-based urologist and an associate professor of surgery at McGill University. He investigated the effect of a varicocelectomy — a minor surgical procedure to remove the varicocele — on fertility and pregnancy rates, especially for older fathers. He found it to be just as effective for men ages 35 to 45 as for men under age 35. "There is a benefit in repairing varicoceles in men over 35, especially men with secondary infertility," he says. (Infertile men who have fathered children in the past are said to have secondary infertility.)

The Case of the Pustulant Postulant

One winter, an 18-year-old novice in the south of Italy preparing to become a nun developed a mysterious sunburn-like rash with peeling and blisters on her face, arms and neck. She had no history of acne or eczema and did not respond to antihistamines, antibiotics or topical corticosteroid creams. Insect bites were ruled out, but the rash and pustules worsened. Then the novice began to complain of diarrhea and showed signs of depression, apathy and confusion. What's the diagnosis?

Diagnosis Pellagra. Pellagra (Italian for sour skin) is a disease of a poor diet, often based on maize and deficient in niacin (vitamin B₃) and the amino acid tryptophan. "In western Europe and North America it is encountered only rarely, mostly in chronic alcoholics and those with gastrointestinal diseases or severe anorexia nervosa," says Dr. Dina Cohen-Pelletier, a dermatologist in Montreal. Unwittingly, this young nun-to-be became the agent of her own dermatological problems. In preparation for the discipline of her calling, she decided to restrict her diet, subsisting mainly on small amounts of polenta and tea and eliminating rich sources of niacin such as poultry and seafood. A return to a balanced protein-rich diet with niacin supplements restored her to health — *Diana Swift*



BRAIN GAMES FOR GAME BRAINS

It was once assumed that nerve cells in the brain deteriorated unstoppably over time, so cognitive function went continually downhill with age. But now neuroscientists tell us that we can do things to rejuvenate our brains and, in some cases, even slow the progress of Alzheimer's disease.

The secret is brain exercises. Giving your grey matter regular workouts helps to move information stored in one part of the brain to other parts, thus improving mental function. The brain has more than 100 billion neurons (nerve cells) and 100 trillion synapses (the connection points between nerve cells). Electrical charges pass through the nerve cells to the synapses, which release chemicals called neurotransmitters that carry the electrical signal to the next cell. Exercising the brain helps this communication process.

Besides eating a nutritious diet and getting adequate physical activity to improve blood circulation to the head, you need to challenge your grey cells regularly in order to stave off age-related cognitive decline. Studying a foreign language or learning to play a musical instrument can stimulate your neurons and synapses. If these activities don't appeal to you, brain exercises might. Check out these options for keeping your brain at the top of its game.

CHALLENGE YOUR INTELLECT

The NeuroActive Complete Brain Training Program is a set of computer exercises that can be downloaded from CDs or the Internet. It is designed to stimulate 16 brain functions. "You get maximum gain in minimum time," says Dr. Stéphane Bergeron, a family physician and president of Brain Centre International in Quebec City. "The software can boost cognitive functioning by 20%."

The program addresses some common memory complaints of baby boomers and seniors — such as finding words to match specific objects or putting names to faces. "We know the word and name, but we can't access it

because the information is stored in a different region of the brain

than the one we need to express it," says Bergeron. The NeuroActive Program helps you to, "reinforce the neuro-pathway between these two regions, so you can recall the words more quickly."

Another feature focuses on visual-spatial skills. It helps people who have difficulty reading maps by honing three-dimensional perception. Another aspect develops reaction time, or raw brain speed, by having participants respond quickly to specific colours or shapes. Bergeron suggests giving your brain a workout of 15 to 30 minutes three times a week.

Available on CDs for both Mac and PC, in English and French, with a 40-page downloadable PDF booklet. Complete Brain Training, \$95.00 (To use the program on a second computer, costs an additional \$20.)

And for high achievers, a just-released software booster features an advanced tier of exercises directed at training the brain to multitask efficiently with less stress.

Available on CDs for both Mac and PC. Memory and MultiTasking Booster, \$69.95. www.neuroactive.ca



BRAIN AND BODY GYM

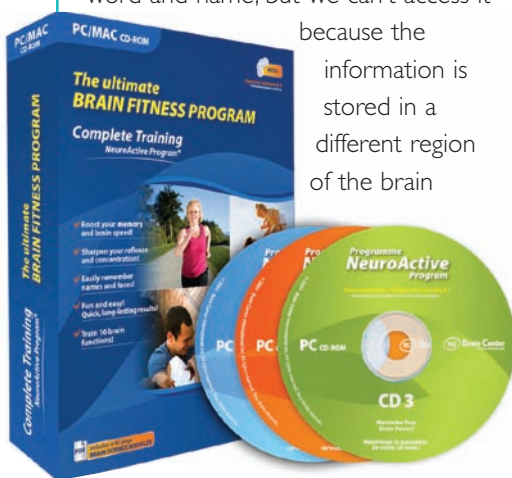
The NeuroActive Bike is a recumbent exercise cycle with a built-in computer and monitor. While your feet work the pedals, your brain works out with mental exercises on the monitor.

The software features an advanced tier of exercises directed at high achievers used to multitasking in their jobs.

Available at select gyms, but also for use at home. Personal Edition, \$3,495. www.neuroactive.ca

WEB WORKOUTS

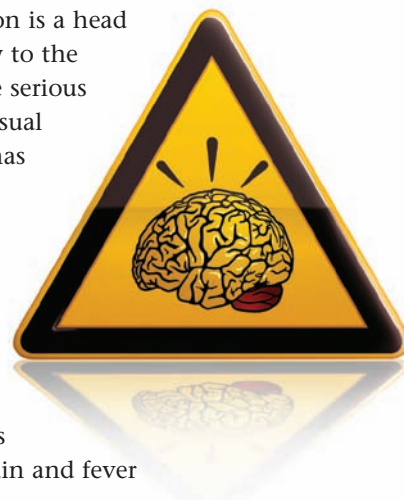
HAPPYneuron is a website offering subscribers 35 brain-stimulating games that focus on such areas as attention, language, memory, visual-spatial skills and executive functions. These drills work the brain beyond the usual



YOUR MEDICAL IQ

HEAD CHECK A concussion is a head and brain injury caused by a blow to the head or body. Concussions can be serious but often go untreated because casual observers don't realize an injury has occurred. Can you spot some commonly overlooked signs and symptoms? Choose one of the following.

- 1 Headache and rapid speech
- 2 Depression, irritability, fatigue, feeling slowed down
- 3 Vomiting, chills and body aches
- 4 Poor balance, neck and head pain and fever



Answer 2 Other more obvious signs and symptoms include headache, drowsiness, dizziness, confusion, light-headedness, disorientation, difficulty concentrating, nausea and sleep disturbances. Most concussions do not cause the injured person to lose consciousness.

pursuits that help to keep seniors sharp. According to HAPPYneuron's co-founder Dr. Bernard Croisile, a neurologist based in Lyon, France, "Activities such as playing bridge may stimulate long-term memory for game rules, but playing cards will it not help anyone find his keys. It is necessary to train all aspects of cognitive function."

The aim of the site's offerings is to strengthen every region of the brain, not just exercise the areas that are already functioning well. You start with easy games and increase the difficulty.

A virtual coach charts your personal progress as you play different games and compares your performance with those of other players of the same gender, age and education level.

One option is a language game called Split Words, in which you match the parts of words that go together within a theme, such as European cities or types of fish. The site's memory game, Around the World in 80 Trips, has you match the order of the cities, monuments and attractions you saw.

The HAPPYneuron website also



provides links to related sites and offers seven-day free trials of games in each cognitive category.

A subscription costs about \$12 per month or \$120 per year: www.happy-neuron.com

FROM TOP: ISTOCKPHOTO; COURTESY HAPPY-NEURON.COM; CONNIE MORRIS

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Physician assistant

Known as a PA, a physician assistant is a licensed health-care professional who works under the supervision of a medical doctor. Duties may include performing physical exams, taking patient interviews, counselling on preventive health care, ordering and interpreting lab tests and X-rays, and assisting in surgery. Originally developed within the Canadian Armed Forces, two-year PA programs are now available at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont., and the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. "We hope to have 5,000 practising PAs in the next five to 10 years," says Maurice Chapman, president of the Ottawa-based Canadian Association of Physician Assistants. "We can help address the chronic shortage of doctors," says Chapman.

The Green House

More than 140,000 tonnes — the equivalent of 28,000 African elephants — of discarded computers, TVs, stereos and phones hit Canadian landfills every year, according to Environment Canada. All that electronic waste, known as e-waste, means that toxic substances such as lead, mercury and cadmium are entering our soil, air and water. Find out how to dispose of your electronics properly by visiting the Electronic Recycling Association at www.era.ca, or by contacting your municipality. ♻️

