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Want to Keep Your Mind Sharp? Try Cocoa. Or Sex.

Sure, word games and the like might help boost your brain power. But some unconventional methods are likely to be more fun.



The mental exercises in yoga 'seem to affect the way you think outside of yoga practice,' says Neha Gothe of Wayne State University. *PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES*

By **BETH HOWARD**

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Sure, crossword puzzles and mind teasers can boost your brain power. But a movie, cocoa and sex might be more fun.

Recent research has highlighted what appear to be several intriguing ways to counter the effects of aging on gray matter. Consider these tactics if you're looking to gain a cognitive edge:

Find your inner artist. MRI tests showed that recent retirees who took drawing or painting classes improved connectivity between regions of the brain, according to researchers at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg in Germany. Many brain functions rely on the interplay between regions.

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Art instruction also increased participants' scores on measures of psychological resilience. "Resilience means that you cope well with stress and negative environmental and social factors," says study author Christian Maihöfner, a physician and professor of neurology at the university.

Go to the mat. A recent study supported by funding from the National Institute on Aging compared a group of people ages 55 to 70 who practiced hatha yoga three times a week and a similar group who did simple stretching and toning exercises. After eight weeks, the yoga group was speedier and more accurate in cognitive tasks and less apt to be distracted.

"The meditative exercises in yoga aim to help you focus and be aware within the moment by trying to keep distracting thoughts away," says researcher Neha P. Gothe, assistant professor of kinesiology, health and sport studies at Wayne State University in Detroit. "These mental exercises seem to affect the way you think outside of yoga practice."

Watch movies in 3-D. Watching a movie in 3-D boosts cognitive performance, according to researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Those who saw the movie in 3-D were 58 milliseconds (thousandths of a second) faster in a reaction-time test after the movie than they had been before the film; those who watched the conventional 2-D version were only 11 milliseconds faster on the second test, says Patrick Fagan, an associate lecturer in consumer behavior and the psychology of marketing and advertising at the school's Institute of Management Studies. Movies in 3-D may be more physiologically stimulating, Mr. Fagan speculates, increasing heart rate and blood flow to the brain.

Drink cocoa. Scores on basic cognitive tests jumped 30% during a one-month study that involved drinking two cups of cocoa a day. The Harvard Medical School study looked at older adults with hypertension and diabetes. Researchers credit cocoa's flavonols—compounds also found in red wine and tea—for helping to increase blood flow to the brain.

Give your regards to Broadway. When Alzheimer's disease patients belted out show tunes three times a week for four months, they made big improvements on tests of memory and other mental abilities. (Just listening to the music didn't help.)

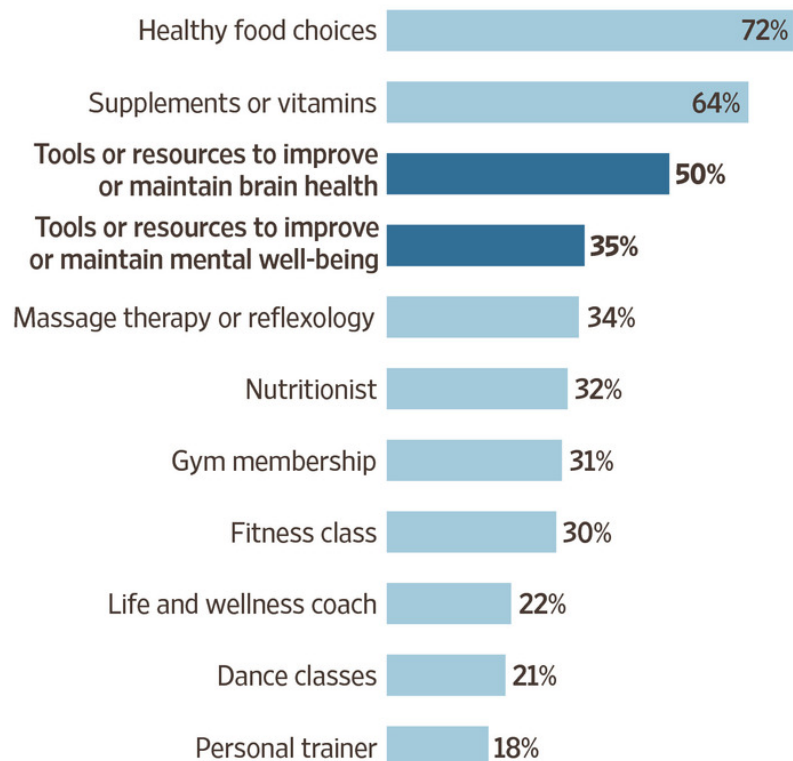
"Music ability seems to be retained to some extent in dementia, and any activity that activates the neurons is a good thing," says lead study author Jane M. Flinn, director of the undergraduate program in neuroscience at George Mason University.

Rev up your sex life. A University of Maryland study found that regular sexual activity increased the formation of new brain cells in middle-aged rats and restored function in the hippocampus, a brain region important for memory. In rats, sex appears to help brain function by lowering levels of stress hormones like cortisol, which hinder the production of nerve cells.

Ms. Howard is a writer in North Carolina. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

Mind Games

The percentage of people surveyed who said they were very or extremely willing to spend on these health activities and products



Source: AARP Research online survey of 1,200 adults ages 34-75, August 2014; margin of error +/- 2.8 percentage points

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