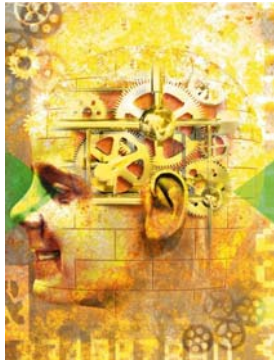


Love brain games? Research lacking on benefits

By Robin Erb, Detroit Free Press 12:08 a.m. EST January 1, 2015



(Photo: Rick Nease, KRT)

If you're turning to crossword puzzles and computerized brain games to keep your mind sharp, some doctors and researchers say they've got a better idea for a New Year's resolution.

Take a walk. Hang out with friends. Read a book.

"We're not saying there's no evidence for change or positive impact" from such mind-benders, said Dr. [Kenneth Langa](http://www.sph.umich.edu/isr/faculty/profile.cfm?username=klanga) (<http://www.sph.umich.edu/isr/faculty/profile.cfm?username=klanga>), a doctor and researcher at the University of Michigan Medical School and VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System.

But, he added, "there's no evidence that doing a crossword puzzle will keep you out of a nursing home."

Langa was among about 70 scientists from around the world who recently issued [a statement](http://longevity3.stanford.edu/blog/2014/10/15/the-consensus-on-the-brain-training-industry-from-the-scientific-community-2/) (<http://longevity3.stanford.edu/blog/2014/10/15/the-consensus-on-the-brain-training-industry-from-the-scientific-community-2/>) through the [Stanford Center on Longevity](http://longevity3.stanford.edu/) (<http://longevity3.stanford.edu/>) in Palo Alto, Calif., and

the [Max Planck Institute for Human Development](https://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en) (<https://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en>) in Berlin.



Dr. Kenneth Langa, a doctor and researcher at the University of Michigan Medical School and VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System. (Photo: UM Photo Services, Scott C. Sode)

Writing from a world of labs and data and charts to a world of consumers terrified of Alzheimer's and other diseases of aging, Langa and the researchers sought to clarify what is supported and what is not supported by the science ... at least so far.

What seems clear is that the brain remains malleable even into old age, taking in new information, processing it and sparking new neurons.

Any mental workout — learning a language, navigating in a new environment, and, yes, even playing commercially available computer games, "will produce changes in those neural systems that support acquisition of the new skill," according to the statement.

But research stops short of connecting those popular mind games with, say, a delayed onset of dementia or a honed ability to remember the complicated route to a favorite in-law's house, to match a name to a face you haven't seen in years, or to remember to take all your meds in the proper quantity and at the right time.

In short — and really, most importantly for aging Americans — is this question: Can brain games help us live more independently longer?

It's simply not yet clear.

Moriah Thomason is an assistant professor in the Wayne State University School of Medicine's pediatrics department and in the [Merrill Palmer Skillman](#)

Institute for Child and Family Development (<http://mpsi.wayne.edu/>). She's also a scientific adviser to [www.Lumosity.com \(<http://www.lumosity.com/>\)](http://www.lumosity.com/), one of the fastest-growing brain game websites.

Data show participants' responses are both more accurate and faster the longer they play certain games, she said.

"We do, without a doubt, see improvement in an individual when they participate," Thomason said. "The questions are the next step: What is the transferred ability? What are the implications for my quality of life?"

"People don't just need to be smarter, they need to be smarter for a reason," she added.

For that reason, Lumosity has turned to scientists to better understand — and build — connections between online games to real-world tasks, developing scientifically sound studies that track improvements against a control group and, most important, that determine whether that improvement transfers to everyday activities.

"The statement that the researchers are making is fair and accurate, but it's that those studies haven't been done," she said of the statement signed by Langa and others.

Still, she said: "There's much to be optimistic about."

Plus, especially if you find them enjoyable, playing them can't hurt while scientists determine what long-term benefits they might hold.

"If brain games constitute your preferred cognitive 'fix' — go for it, enjoy," suggests Dr. Naftali Raz (<http://www.iog.wayne.edu/profile/naftali.raz/>), another Wayne State researcher who, like Langa, signed the statement in October. "But if you have other things that get your mind going, keep doing them, give brain games a pass."

For now, the best way to keep minds sharp — at least the way that is most supported by research — is in remaining active and engaged, all three Michigan scientists say.

For example, physical activity can help reduce risks of stroke, which leads to vascular dementia, the second most common form of dementia after Alzheimer's, according to the Alzheimer's Association. And it appears an engaged lifestyle — one that involves reading, for example, and socializing with friends — keeps the brain limber and more able to take on complicated tasks, the Michigan researchers agreed.

Contact Robin Erb: rerb@freepress.com (<mailto:rerb@freepress.com>) or 313-222-2708. Follow her on Twitter [@FreepHealth](https://twitter.com/FreepHealth). (<https://twitter.com/FreepHealth>)


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