

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Heart Health Makes a Difference and Brain Health Matters

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Today we are celebrating American Heart Month by looking at how heart health can impact and protect our brain health, optimize brain performance, and fight brain illness.*

February is American Heart Month, bringing awareness to heart disease and ways we can improve our cardiac health. But heart health is also important for our brain health, so the same steps that help prevent heart disease can also protect our brain health.

The heart and the brain are connected by our vascular system — the blood vessels that carry blood and nutrients from the heart to the brain and back. That steady flow of oxygen-rich blood nourishes our brain cells and protects our brain functions. Diseases that constrict the blood vessels or slow the flow of blood to our brain can increase the risk of brain illness and lead to stroke and cognitive impairment.

In addition, certain brain illnesses and heart diseases seem to go hand-in-hand. A [Harvard Health](#) article looked at the link between anxiety and depression, for example, and heart disease. Citing a study that followed 221,000 people for more than four years, the article states that the people who had reported high or very high levels of depression and anxiety were more likely to have had a heart attack or stroke than people without those symptoms.

These findings don't mean depression and anxiety cause heart disease, but rather that distress and cardiac disease both stem from the same underlying mechanisms, said Dr. Jill Goldstein, executive director of the Women, Heart and Brain Global Initiative, a collaborative effort between Massachusetts General Hospital and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

“We have found shared causes for both illnesses that begin even before birth that are carried throughout life,” Dr. Goldstein says in the article. “Mental health disorders and cardiovascular

problems might not just co-occur in adulthood. Instead, people may be vulnerable to both conditions over a lifetime because of their early exposures.” (See our two-part series [about the effects of early stress on lifelong health](#) for more information.)

So, during this month celebrating hearts, let’s remember the heart-head connection and take steps to protect our brain health, promote brain performance, and fight brain illness across the lifespan.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Because living a heart-healthy lifestyle can also help protect your brain health, fight brain illness, , optimize your brain performance, and reduce or even prevent cognitive decline, the BHI suggests you start with these tips from the [American Heart Association](#) (AHA).

- **Stop smoking.** It’s tough to quit smoking, but it’s harder to recover from a heart attack or stroke. There are plenty of tools available to help you quit for good. Start by visiting [Quit Smoking](#) for plans, tips and tools to help you quit.
- **Eat healthy.** A brain healthy diet can help you manage brain health risk and protective factors, including your cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes and weight. Choose a brain promoting Mediterranean diet that features plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grain, low-fat dairy products, poultry, fish, legumes, non-tropical vegetable oils, and nuts. Learn more in our [Brain Boost: Food for Mood, Food for Thought, and Food for Staying Healthy](#).
- **Manage cholesterol.** Cholesterol is fat lodged in your arteries. Eww, right? High cholesterol is a risk factor for brain illness and eventually, it can trigger a heart attack or stroke. Reduce saturated fat and trans-fats in your diet and get moving and keep active to lower your cholesterol. If that doesn’t work, talk to your doctor about medication that can help lower your cholesterol. If diet and physical activity alone don't get those numbers down, then medication may be the key.
- **Lower your blood pressure.** High blood pressure is a risk factor for brain illness and the leading cause of stroke, so if your blood pressure is higher than 120/80 you need to get your numbers down and keep them down. Exercise and reducing the sodium (salt) in your diet can help lower your numbers. If your doctor prescribes medication for your blood pressure be sure you take it as directed.
- **Exercise.** Being physically active every day is a protective factor for brain health and optimizes brain performance across the lifespan. The [Physical Guidelines for Americans](#) recommends at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity physical activity. If you aren’t currently exercising, start out slow but get started. Even a few minutes of exercise offers some brain and physical health benefits. Studies show that people who have achieved a moderate level of fitness are much less likely to die early than those with a low fitness level. Physical activity is one of the Brain Health Initiative’s brain health protective factors because exercise improves blood flow to, and within, the brain providing the oxygen and nutrients it needs for optimal health and performance.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Obesity is a risk factor for brain illness and an epidemic for both adults and children in this country. Good brain healthy nutrition, controlling

calorie intake and physical activity are the only ways to maintain a healthy weight. Obesity places you at risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and insulin resistance, a precursor of type 2 diabetes — just some of the very factors that heighten your risk of brain illness and cardiovascular disease.

- **Prevent or manage diabetes.** When combined with other risk factors — high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, and lack of physical activity — diabetes can greatly increase your chance of developing brain illness and cardiovascular disease. Following these brain healthy lifestyle changes can also help control your diabetes or even prevent you from developing the condition.
- **Reduce stress.** Stress has robustly been linked to brain illness and heart disease so find ways to manage your stress. Check out our [Brain Boost: Building Resilience](#) for ways to manage stress.
- **Moderate your alcohol use.** Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure, increase cardiomyopathy, stroke, cancer, and other diseases. If you drink, limit your alcohol consumption to no more than two drinks per day for men and no more than one drink per day for women. Check out our [Brain Boost about drinking in moderation](#).
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a Brain Healthy Lifestyle**, including thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses and language that promote:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

### **About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).