



Get those
grey cells
working!

TIPS AND TRICKS
FOR SENIORS

Québec 



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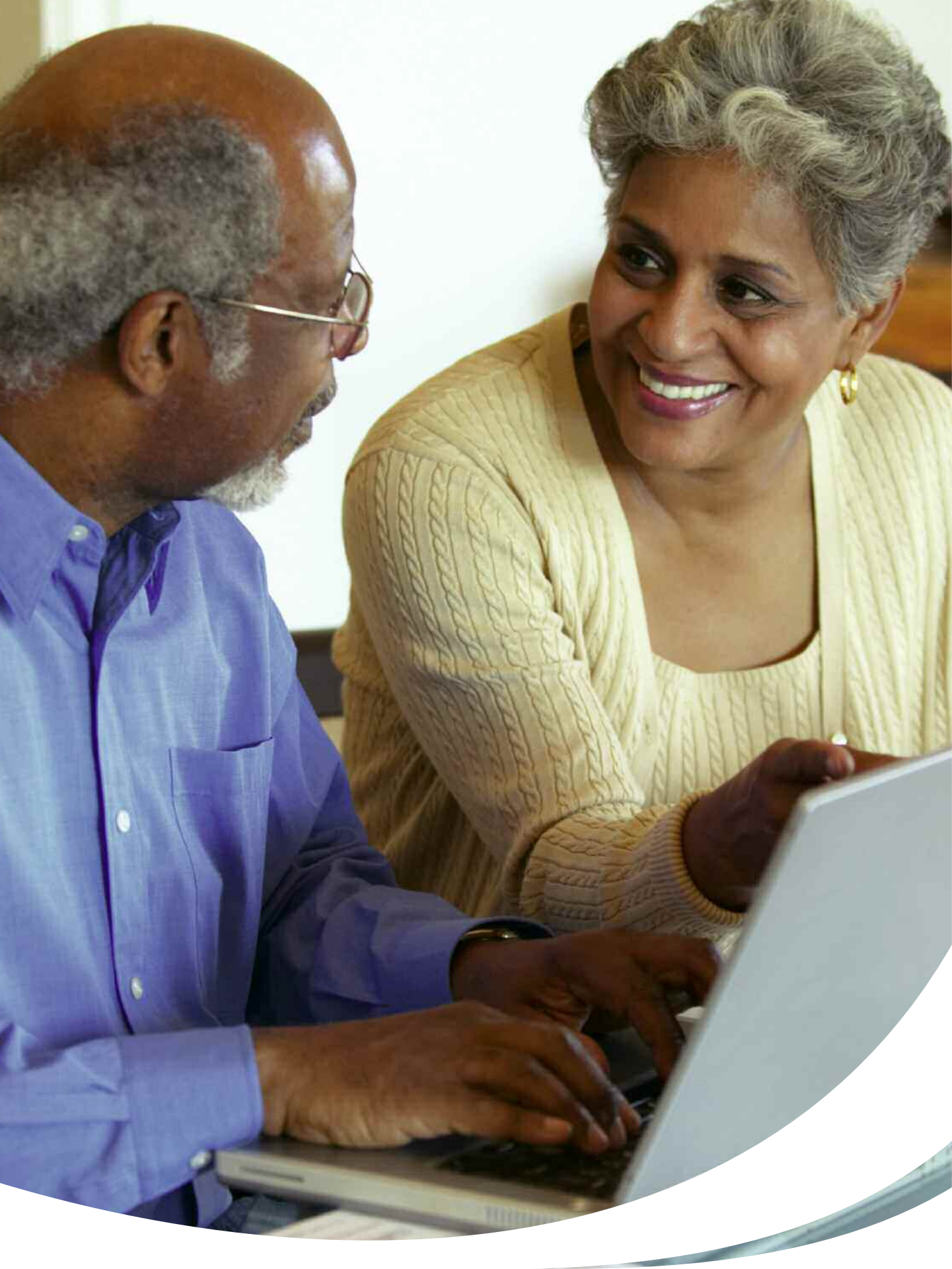


Are you 60, 70 or 85 years old and have perhaps noticed changes in your ability to think and to remember? Perhaps you are a little less sprightly or else, more absent-minded? Do some words or people's names not come to mind as easily as before? Adapting to new things requires more effort? Your memory sometimes plays tricks on you?

Reassure yourself: all of the above are just part of the **NORMAL AGEING PROCESS**. Besides, these slight inconveniences probably aren't enough to prevent you from enjoying life and remaining autonomous.

However, it is true that we can experience some frustration as we age. After all, just like the rest of the body, the brain changes over time...

Here are some tips that you can include in your everyday life to better manage these irritants.



Take your *time...*

As we age, our reflexes slow down somewhat and we process and analyze information less quickly. It's nothing to be embarrassed about!

- Slow things down! Give yourself more time to process information, or else time to think before answering or acting when something is expected of you.
- When you read a newspaper or magazine article, ask yourself what the author wanted to say. Take extra time to mentally sum up the major ideas of the piece in your own words. You will see that this method is very effective both to better understand and to better retain information.
- You may be learning Spanish, or perhaps how to surf the Internet? When you do homework or reread your notes, take it a little at a time. You will retain information better if, during the day, you plan four 15-minute study sessions instead of a single, one-hour session.
- Taking your time also allows you to repeat information that you did not fully grasp, or else to immediately note down information that you consider important; it also means you can graciously accept signs of impatience shown by others.

Generally speaking, you will feel less overwhelmed and more in charge if you get into the habit of establishing priorities and routines, and if you plan your timetable efficiently.



Be *attentive!*

As we age, we are more easily distracted and have greater difficulty in concentrating and in doing more than one thing at a same time. As a result, extra effort is required, and we need to constantly remind ourselves to be attentive. Don't forget, focus is the door that opens our memory banks.

- You have surely noticed that, as we get older, some parts of the day (mornings most often) are better suited than others for concentrating. Learn to adapt your routine to perform more demanding activities at the beginning of your day. In addition, a calm environment, free from sources of distraction such as television, is preferable for an activity such as reading.
- Do you want to learn to use your new digital camera? Try a step-by-step approach and start by familiarizing yourself with the basics. Your thoughts might wander from one idea to the next ("I mustn't forget to make an appointment with the dentist!") and impede your ability to concentrate. Write down any ideas that come to mind as you think of them; that way, you can come back to them later on. Pace yourself by pausing regularly so as not to tire yourself out.

- Help yourself by avoiding, as much as possible, situations that require you to perform two tasks at the same time, especially when one or the other requires concentration (e.g., preparing a meal for guests while keeping up a conversation with them). You would be better off leaving your guests to talk among themselves while you cook. You can always join the conversation when the meal is ready!
- If you have a tendency to forget what you went to look for in another room, get into the habit of repeating the name of this object to yourself as you go.
- Are you hearing less well? If this is the case, understanding will require even more attention, so be vigilant! If you wear a hearing aid, ensure that it is properly adjusted. It's easier to memorize something when we hear it well!



Make *associations*

Associate new information with what you already know. This will help you to remember more easily.

Example 1: Your new neighbour's name is Steve, just like your nephew. Simply associating the two will help to remind yourself more easily of the new neighbour's first name.

Example 2: If you leave your car in the parking lot of a shopping centre, take a minute or two to locate a landmark. If the landmark is a lettered or numbered sign, twin the information with another familiar item. For example, if you are parked in Section B, you could think of your husband Bert, Bill or Bob. Before entering the shopping centre, take a few moments to look at the parking as a whole and remind yourself of the association that you made. This strategy will avoid wasting time searching your car when you have finished shopping.

To write your grocery shopping list efficiently, it is better to group products by category (dairy products, fruits, vegetables, etc). Organizing the information will improve your ability to remember when needed. Another useful way of retaining new information is to associate it with a picture.

Example 3: You want to retain the name of a wine you liked called Golden Harvest. First of all, break the brand name down into several mental pictures, for example an ingot of GOLD and a heap of STRAW. Finally, put these two images together, for example, an ingot of gold sitting in a nest of straw. This association will more easily pop up in your mind when you need it! Try this trick with your friends; it's amusing as well as practical!

Also, reading information beforehand about a lecture you want to attend will allow you to better retain its subject matter. This way, you will be able to associate it with things that you already know. You will also see that forgetfulness will become less frequent when you associate a new activity with one of your existing habits. For instance, if you have a tendency to forget to water your plants, you could decide to always water on the day your favourite television show is broadcast.

Train your *memory*

A simple trick that will help you to retain new information is to repeat it over and over at increasing intervals.

For instance, to learn a new telephone number, note it down, then try to redial it immediately in your memory and check if you have it right. Do the exercise again a few seconds later, then again several minutes later, and so on. Once you repeat the number three or four times, the chances are good that when you decide to phone to this person, their number will spontaneously come to mind!

Using *markers to search*

Have you forgotten where you left your scissors? Try to remember in what circumstances you used them last time. In which room of the home were you? Was it to sew, or perhaps to open a package? Reconstructing context can help you to recollect information. The same strategy can be used to remember more details about information you may have heard or read.



Make better use of *your planner!*

Do you sometimes make incomplete notations in your planner? For instance, you might skip noting the place where a meeting is to be held, then ask yourself later on what the notation means.

When you use your planner, take the time to properly write down all the information, it will really make your life simpler! A good trick is the “3P” rule (the **P**erson whom you are to meet, the **P**lace where you have arranged to meet and the **P**eriod of the day set for the meeting).

Tips for organizing your planner more efficiently:

- Small-format agendas are good since you can bring them along wherever you go. Choose a planner that has enough space to write down all the information you require, for example, one with pages divided into three sections (morning, afternoon and evening).
- Personalize your planner. Add sections to it and stick notes in it. Organize any helpful information such as telephone numbers, shopping lists, important personal information, bills to be paid, etc. Life is complicated; and you don't have to memorize everything!
- Get into the habit of consulting your planner regularly. If you find it difficult to do this spontaneously, try associating the planner with a specific part of the day or a regular activity, for instance, before lunch and before supper.
- Note down what you want to remember. Don't worry: this strategy will not make your memory lazy! To the contrary: it will improve your attention and, as a result, your chances of retaining information will get better.

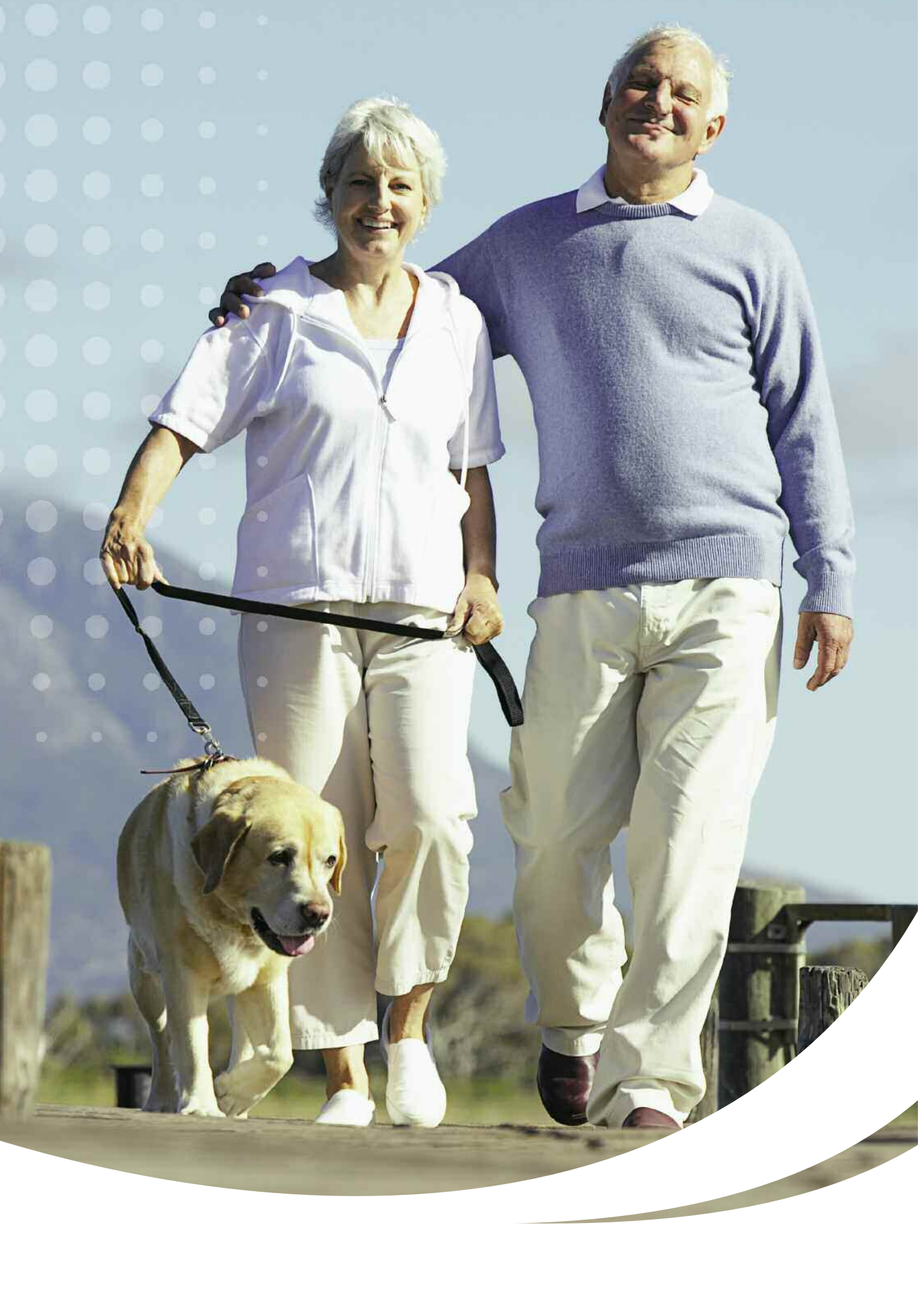


Using other *memory helpers*

Memory helpers are tools that make life easier, since they contribute to improved management of daily life. Choose one that suits your lifestyle.

A blackboard or whiteboard located in a strategic place (in the kitchen or near the telephone) is a good place to write down phone calls to be made or items to be purchased. Notes on the calendar or on the refrigerator door are also useful, but of course, you have to remember to look at them!

You should have only one place where you keep your keys, glasses, wallet and other objects that you regularly need. As much as possible, do not change this location.

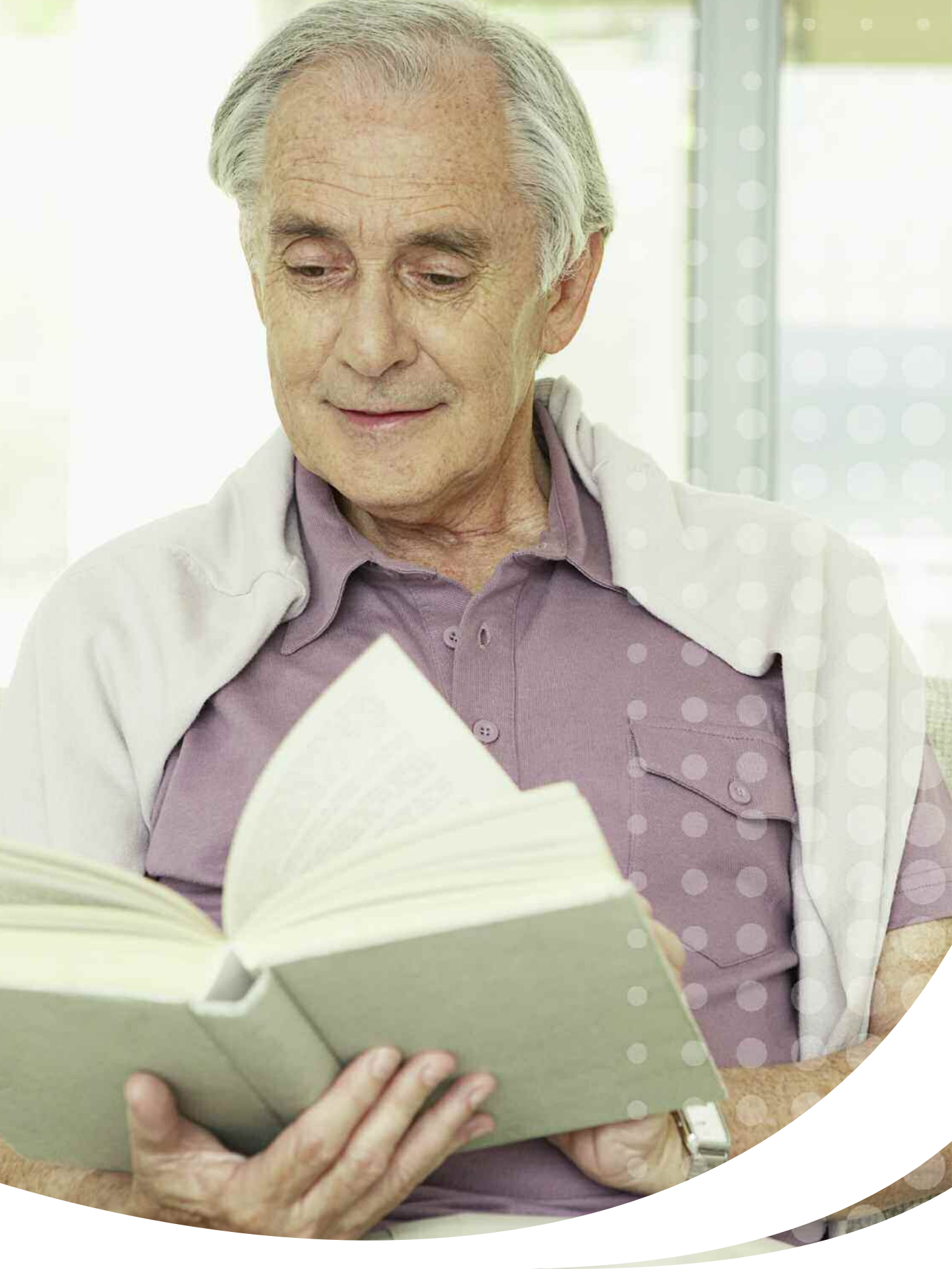


Developing good habits to keep your brain healthy

- Regular physical exercise has a positive effect on your attention and therefore, on memory.
- A healthy diet such the one found in Canada's Food Guide also plays an essential role in the proper functioning of memory and attention.
- Moreover, lack of sleep, excessive consumption of alcohol and certain medications can have adverse effects on intellectual capabilities.
- Depression, stress and fatigue will also diminish your cognitive abilities.
- High blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, tobacco and obesity can also affect brain function.

By becoming more aware of your life habits, you will be better able to make changes that are of benefit to you.

**STAY
ACTIVE!**
Choose
recreational
or cultural
and social
activities
that challenge
you, such as
learning a
language,
taking dancing
lessons, or
surfing the
Web.



Putting it all together

You will remember that it is untrue to state that we lose our intellectual abilities as we grow old. Some people may become a little more temperamental, but recognizing that we are not perfect is a good beginning. Better still is to have a more defined notion of one's problems (Am I less focused? Slower? What do I forget?), because this will allow you to use effective tricks to manage them better. Have a good attitude and trust in yourself!

Do your anxieties persist? Are your difficulties more frequent or serious? Do people in your social circle observe changes in you? If this is the case, speak to your doctor. He can provide you with answers to your questions.

Age also has its advantages!

Your judgment becomes more subtle and sharp, you understand priorities better and often have more time for your favourite activities. Besides, your knowledge banks get bigger with each passing year and you continue to excel in areas that you know well (swimming, music, gardening, bridge, etc.). And let's not forget that you always recall older memories with ease.

IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

Having a good attitude, socializing, feeling useful, making plans and feeling in charge of one's life are some of the factors that can have a beneficial effect on intellectual ability.



Software for your brain

Many brain exercise computer programs are now widely available.

- For the time being, medical science knows little about the effectiveness of such software, owing to insufficient independent, reliable research. As a result, even if your performance in these programs improves each time you do the exercises, it does not necessarily mean that you will notice an everyday improvement in your intellectual capabilities.
- On the other hand, it should be obvious that if you enjoy these types of activities, the software can provide general intellectual stimulation.

Keep in mind that you can achieve similar results with pastimes in areas that interest you, and that require concentration. Playing cards or Scrabble, doing crossword puzzles or solving Sudokus, are all fine choices. The important thing is that the chosen activity represents a challenge for you, because in the end, the aim is to get your grey cells working!

