

Cerebral Advantage

5

THE SUNDAY
MAGAZINE

How many times have you been told that being physically fit will keep you mentally sharp? A gazillion times in the least. More so now with the pandemic forcing people to stay home. Most of us are tied to our home desks with abysmal exercise. But there's a silver lining. A recent study stands in your favour. Conducted by the University of Cambridge, it states that 'people who work in jobs that require less physical activity, specifically office and desk-jobs, actually have a lower risk of subsequent poor cognition than those whose work is a more physically active environment.' Let's look at how this plays out.

Desk job equals a sharper mind

Generally, people involved in desk-jobs need to be more focused, and therefore they need to be mentally active. They're trained for problem-solving. Consequently, their cognitive abilities are better developed than those involved in more manual work or work that requires movement. "The brain works just like a muscle; the more you train it, the better it becomes. The more developed the cognition centre is, the slower will be its deterioration. That's why it is extremely important for people involved in physically demanding work to make it a point to stimulate their brains and not just their body," says Dr Abhinav Raina, Consultant Neurology, Manipal Hospitals, Whitefield, Bengaluru.

Desk jobs tend to be more cognitively demanding than a manual occupation. "So, the more you keep using your brain or using its faculties, stimulating it regularly, the better your overall mental abilities. I follow the simple mantra—you lose it if you don't use it," says Raina.



"No two humans are alike. No two brains are alike. No two psychological profiles are alike. A balance of cognitive activities at work and physical activities is the best recipe for brain health."

Sahiba Sethi, Counselling Psychologist, Umeed Healing, Jaipur

The relationship between cognitive functions and physical activity is not as straightforward as you think. Read on.

By BINDU GOPAL RAO



In a Nutshell

Because people involved in desk-jobs need to be more focused, they're also mentally active. They're trained for problem-solving. Consequently, their cognitive abilities are better developed than those involved in more manual work or work that requires movement. The more developed the cognition centre is, the slower will be its deterioration.

Train your Brain

In his experience, those who have more cognitively stimulating jobs, present ailments like dementia at least 10 years later than those who do not, according to Dr Milan Balakrishnan, Psychiatrist, Masina Hospital, Mumbai. "Our brain is structured in a way that cognitive activity (processing information, analysing things, planning and executing plans), when done regularly, helps improve our cognitive reserve. This reserve is what we need to build for later years. It slows progression of the illness," he says.

Therefore, those with desk jobs are in a good place health-wise because the mind ultimately holds every other aspect of the body. Their cognitive flexibility keeps them away from many lifestyle diseases and this is a fact that needs more

conversation.

On the other hand, those involved in more physically demanding jobs, need to make a special effort to stimulate their brain by finding activities that will be mentally rewarding. One can start reading for example. Or you can start journaling, play word games, card games, crosswords, or picture puzzles. These simple activities can go a long way to promote the health of one's brain.

Dr Aravind Raj, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatric Social Work, NIMHANS, Bengaluru says, "It's also important to keep in mind that there are different kinds of desk jobs. Not all are equally brain strengthening. For instance, someone may be working on basic accounting, while someone else may be inferring data and making

"Our brain is structured in a way that cognitive activity, when done regularly, helps improve our reserve. This reserve is what we need to build for later years."

Dr Milan Balakrishnan, Senior Psychiatrist, Masina Hospital, Mumbai

decisions. The use of cognitive functions is starkly different so one needs to make an extra effort where necessary."

Physical activity is important too

The above argument doesn't negate the need for physical activity. Sahiba Sethi, Counselling Psychologist, Umeed Healing, says, "While we can all count studies and generalise, the fact is that these are all templates. When you deal with



numbers it is easy to collate people in one group and propose a hypothesis but when you are dealing with individuals, individuality matters. No two humans are alike. No two brains are

alike. No two psychological profiles are alike. A balance of cognitive activities at work and physical activities is the best recipe for brain health." For now, don't fret being on the desk for too long. Your mind is still sharp.

