

Archives of Internal Medicine, July 23, 2001

Women Who Walk Remember Study

When the cognitive abilities of elderly women were compared, those who walked regularly were less likely to experience age-related memory loss and other declines in mental function.

University of California at San Francisco researchers measured the brain function of nearly 6,000 women during an eight-year period. The results were correlated with the women's normal activity level, including their routine walking and stair-climbing.

"In the higher-energy groups, we saw much less cognitive decline," said neurologist Kristine Yaffe, MD. Of the women who walked the least (a half-mile per week), 24% had significant declines in their test scores, compared to only 17% of the most active women (17 miles per week).

It wasn't a matter of all or nothing. "We also found that for every extra mile walked per week there was a 13% less chance of cognitive decline," said Yaffe, who is Chief of Geriatric Psychiatry at the San Francisco Veterans Administration Medical Center. "So you don't need to be running marathons. The exciting thing is there was a 'dose' relationship which showed that even a little is good but more is better."

"In the higher-energy groups, we saw much less cognitive decline" – a protective effect amounting to as much as 40% – according to Yaffe. "This is an important intervention that all of us can do and it could have huge implications in preventing cognitive decline."