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Brain training can help improve specific abilities in older people

But there is no scientific proof that brain training improves overall mental fitness

Cologne, 23 December 2009. Many brain training products claim to be able to keep us mentally fit. Some products even claim that brain training can prevent dementia in old age. But there is no scientific proof that games or other brain exercises can have this effect. That is what the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) pointed out in information published on informedhealthonline.org (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/informed-health-online.2.en>) today.

Brain training can lead to an improvement, but only in the specific ability it is aimed at

As we get older our thinking gets slower and it is harder for us to learn new things. Many people try to stay mentally fit by, for example, learning a new language or doing crossword puzzles. Computer games that aim to keep the brain active are also becoming increasingly popular. "Doing exercises like trying to find symbols on a computer screen as fast as possible can actually improve your reaction time," explains Professor Peter Sawicki, the Institute's Director. "But scientific studies have shown that brain training only leads to an improvement in the specific ability that it is aimed at. So if you learn to find symbols quickly, it does not mean that you will be able to remember names better too."

There is no need for people to push themselves to do brain training if they do not enjoy it

Research has not shown that brain training can keep up or enhance people's overall mental abilities. "So there is no need to feel bad if you do not enjoy brain training: there are no health reasons for doing it," says Sawicki. "But if you think brain training exercises are fun, you can try out different things. For example, completing sequences of letters can improve your logic skills. And practising word association techniques can help you to remember things better."

The Institute's website, www.informedhealthonline.org (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/informed-health-online.2.en.html>), provides the public with easy-to-understand information about current medical developments and research on important health issues. If you would like to be kept up-to-date with the latest publications on the independent

health information website, you can subscribe to the informedhealthonline.org newsletter (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/newsletter.69.en.html>)

Contact: information@iqwig.de (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/mailto:information@iqwig.de>)

Information:

Mental fitness: Does brain training when you are older help? (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.596.en.html>)

Sources

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at www.informedhealthonline.org

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This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.