

# Be Active and Make Healthy Lifestyle Choices

**Being active is strongly linked to healthy aging and staying independent.** Being active helps people maintain their physical and cognitive function throughout life, and helps older adults to develop fewer chronic conditions.

Studies of aging have shown a link between increased physical activity and:

- Reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, and some types of cancer
- Better thinking and memory compared to those who are not active
- Increased brain size in areas that are key to memory function and increased blood flow to the brain, which helps your body and your brain

## **Lifestyle choices that help your heart health also help your brain health.**

- Heart healthy choices like quitting smoking and eating a healthy diet may reduce your risk of dementia and help with clear thinking
- And, drinking less alcohol may reduce harm to your brain – prolonged moderate to heavy drinking has been shown to harm the brain

## **What you can do:**

- Move – the best exercise is the one you will do; visit [www.move.va.gov](http://www.move.va.gov)
- **Even small increases in activity can have big benefits, so plan to move MORE than you do now** – you do not need to begin by joining a gym or lifting weights
- Talk with your doctor or therapist to find safe activities for you. Some ideas:
  - Start by walking more – work up to 30 minutes a day most days of the week
  - Ride a bike instead of driving, when you can
  - When you sit for a long time, take a break to get up and move every hour
  - Get a pedometer to count your steps then set a goal and work up to it slowly – there are many free pedometer apps for smart phones
  - Do chair exercises if you are not able to walk or must sit for a long time
  - Let go of “all or nothing” thinking – forgive yourself if you miss a day of being active and get back on track the next day
  - Try to include *both* aerobic activities (like swimming or dancing) and strength building (like climbing stairs or heavy gardening) in your routine
  - Exercise with a buddy or join a group – many VA clinics offer classes and support
  - If you smoke, think about quitting – the VA also offers many programs to help

