



brain TRAIN

CAN APPS REALLY BE EFFECTIVE IN PREVENTING DEMENTIA? JO HARTLEY FINDS OUT.

Type “brain training” into the App Store, and you can choose from more than 2200 results.

There are apps that claim to test and improve verbal reasoning, concentration, spatial awareness and memory, and some that even claim to help prevent the onset of dementia.

But can they *really*?

With more than 1800 new cases diagnosed each week, dementia is the second-leading cause of death in Australia, with twice as many women as men dying from it each year. The number of people in Australia with dementia is expected to be almost 900,000 by 2050.

“Brain training apps are attracting increased interest as more people seek education about how to reduce their risk of developing dementia,” says Suha Ali, risk reduction manager at Alzheimer’s Australia. BrainyApp is one such example. Developed by Alzheimer’s Australia and Bupa Health, it raises awareness about risk factors for the disease, has practical suggestions on how to build brain- and heart-healthy activities into your life, and brain games to help you exercise your memory,

language and motor-control skills.

Brain health isn’t just about playing Sudoku or similar games, though, says Ali, and there are limitations to brain training as a stand-alone activity.

Associate professor Michael Valenzuela, from Sydney University’s Brain & Mind Research Institute, agrees. “Apps are useful for education about preventative activities, but for maximum brain benefits we need to optimise all aspects of our lifestyles,” he says.

A study released in 2014 from the Regenerative Neuroscience Group at Sydney University found that while some forms of brain training can improve memory and thinking, not all approaches are effective.

Adults engaged in group-based brain training supervised by a trainer displayed improved cognitive skills in comparison to those who conducted self-directed brain training at home.

“Done at home, brain training has no benefit for cognitive function compared to placebo activities, whereas a trainer ensures you are exercising areas that require improvement, not just those you’re good at, and keeps you motivated,” says Valenzuela. “The social aspect of group



training is likely to be an important part of the therapeutic process too.”

Group brain training is currently available at the Brain & Mind Research Institute, and support is being gathered to set up 100 brain-training centres around Australia.

Despite this, Valenzuela says that improving cognitive function is not the same as preventing dementia. “The evidence tells us that this training is effective for general cognitive function, but much more research is needed to identify whether that is effective in delaying or preventing dementia.”

In the meantime, Valenzuela believes that engaging in new and stimulating activities that challenge your mind and body are just as effective for brain health. “Individuals can exercise their brain health by taking up dancing, learning a new language, travelling, or learning tai chi or yoga,” he says.

Neuroscientist Dr Sarah McKay agrees that brain training alone is not going to prevent dementia. She says there are certain factors that are known to help reduce risk, such as following a Mediterranean diet, doing enough exercise, and being socially connected.

McKay suggests taking half-hour walks and listening to a podcast, or some kind of stimulating information, as an alternative to brain training. “Look at your whole lifestyle first and how you can improve your brain health,” she says. “Look at how you eat, sleep, exercise and mentally challenge and stimulate yourself, and then incorporate brain training as one part of that.”

She recommends BrainyApp, as well as ABC’s Active Memory, which has been designed in conjunction with scientists at Melbourne’s Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health.

“I’m also a fan of mindfulness apps such as Smiling Mind,” she adds. “We can all benefit from learning about what we struggle with, and how to switch off

from the ‘busy’. Plus, by taking care of your mental health, you also take care of your brain health.” ●



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