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Maintaining cognitive health in an ageing society

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A significant concern associated with growing old is the loss of cognitive function, resulting in dementia. Fortunately, the current research on ageing indicates that cognitive decline is not an inevitable function of the ageing process. Moreover, individuals can take steps to maintain cognitive health throughout life. This paper reviews the research findings and recommendations for maintaining cognitive health that were presented at a meeting sponsored by the Alliance for Health and the Future in November 2003. The meeting, 'Placing Cognitive Health on Europe's Social and Economic Agenda', reviewed the current state of knowledge about cognitive health and discussed its implications for an ageing Europe. Although the brain, for reasons that remain unclear, changes with age, a growing body of research suggests that social engagement, intellectual stimulation, and physical activity play a key role in maintaining cognitive health and preventing cognitive decline. As the number of older people increases and people live longer, developing and implementing strategies for maintaining cognitive health should be a priority for both individuals and societies.