Learn something new - your brain will thank you

The idea that learning a new skill - say juggling, cooking, or playing the guitar - can be like an addiction is no joke.

Even listening to music can be a little like a drug. A brain imaging study that came out last year proved what many scientists long suspected: Listening to music can lead the brain to release the neurotransmitter dopamine. Dopamine is the brain’s universal signal for pleasure, an internal system that tells the brain (sometimes rightly, someone wrongly) that it is doing the right thing.

Drugs elicit dopamine artificially by fooling the brain, while activities like sex and eating elicit dopamine naturally. Listening to music taps into the dopamine system in part because hearing something new is a signal that the brain is learning something, and we have evolved to enjoy acquiring new information.

Shortcuts like drugs however are fleeting. Although narcotics can elicit dopamine fairly directly, overtime it takes a bigger and bigger dose to get the same rush, and can lead people to destroy families, risk their health and even lose their lives.

Learning new things is a lot safer, ultimately a lot more satisfying.

There is a myth that children (and for that matter adults) don’t really enjoy learning new things, but as every video game maker has realized, the truth is just the opposite. From “Space Invaders” to “Halo, “Grand Theft Auto” and Zelda,” practically every video game is in part about mastering new skills.

Learning a more lasting skill - is it playing guitar or learning to speak a foreign language - can equally harness the brain’s joy of learning new things, but leave you with something of permanent value in a way that neither drugs nor video games ever could. It leaves you with sense of fulfillment, which goes back to what pioneering psychologist Abraham Maslow called “self-actualization”

As Aristotle realized, there is a difference between the pleasures of the moment (hedonia), and the satisfaction that comes from constantly developing and living one’s life to the fullest (eudaimonia).

In recent years, scientists have finally begun to study eudaimonia. Research suggests that the greater suggests that the greater sense of purpose and personal growth associated with eudaimonia correlates with lower cortisol levels, better immune function and more efficient sleep.

From the strict “Selfish Gene” perspective – in which all that we do is driven by the self-perpetuating interests in our individual genes-hobbies like playing music rarely make sense, especially for the amateurs. But maybe the art of reinvention and acquiring new skills, even as adults, can give us a sense of a life well-lived.

Source: http://thechart.blogs.cnn.com

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**Moms-to-be: Folic acid associated with reduced risk of autism**

A new study announced this week suggests that women who consume the recommended daily dosage of folic acid during the first month of pregnancy may have a reduced risk of having a child with autism.

The study furthers the researcher’s earlier investigations, which found that prenatal vitamins around the time of conception have a protective effect against autism, but the time researchers from UC Davis MIND institute sought to pinpoint folic acid’s role.

The study found that women who consumed the daily recommended amount of folic acid—600 micrograms, or .6milligrams—during the first month of pregnancy experienced a reduced risk of having a child with autism. The study will be published in the July issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition.

“This research is congruent with the findings of earlier studies that suggest that improved neurodevelopment outcomes are associated with folic acid intakes in early pregnancy,” said lead study author Rebecca J. Schmidt.” It further supports recommendations that women with any chance of becoming pregnant should consider consuming folic acid at levels of 600 micrograms or greater per day.”

An estimated 1 in 88 children born today will be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, according to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Source: http://news.yahoo.com/

**Health of Americans a mixed bag: CDC Reports**

There were both good and bad trends in the overall health of Americans in 2011, a new government report shows.

For example, Americans are exercising more, smoking less and getting vaccinated against pneumonia, and the Affordable Care Act means fewer people are going without health care, according to the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, Americans are more obese than ever and diabetes is hitting older people hard.

The CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics released the early findings of their 2011 National Health Interview Survey.

Overall report, based on data not as yet adjusted but nonetheless valid, demonstrates both significant improvements in the nation’s health and health habits, and areas that still require serious attention.

Among the latter is the obesity epidemic, which over time will predispose increasingly larger numbers of people to both type 2 diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease.

(Continuing)
Health of Americans a mixed bag: CDC Reports (cont.)

The decline in smoking rates among adults is very good news and is the result of a combination of extensive public health education efforts, a decline in social acceptance of smoking, restrictions on where people can smoke and the increased costs of smoking.

Aerobic exercising has been widely embraced by many younger people, which is an excellent development as it addresses not only the health needs to be active, build muscle tone and bone density, and promote cardiac fitness, but also the prevention of overweight and obesity.

However, this is offset by those who do not exercise and who adhere to unhealthy diets, leading to obesity. This results in the seemingly contradictory date of 48.4 percent of adults reporting aerobic exercising, and 28.7 percent reported being obese.

The percentage of adults who drink five or more alcoholic drinks a day has dropped after increasing between 2004 and 2010, to just over 22 percent in 2011.

Self-reported obesity in Americans over age 20 has climbed from 19.4 percent in 1997 to 28.7 percent in 2011.

One in five adults aged 65 and older has diabetes versus one in 10 among those aged 45 to 54.

Among black children under 15 years of age 16.6 percent have asthma; that figure is 10 percent for Hispanic children and 7.5 percent for white kids.

Fifty percent of adults aged 25 to 44 say they have tested for HIV.

Most Americans (87 percent) had a usual place to go for medical care in 2011, a little more than the 2010 estimate of 85.4 percent.

In 2011, almost 67 percent of those aged 6 and older had received a vaccine against pneumonia, a significant increase from 43 percent in 1997. These are the worst of times when it comes to obesity and diabetes, both of which are at high levels and still rising.

The rise in diabetes rates among older adults has its counterpart in the rising prevalence in children. More adults reporting obesity similarly is mirrored by the unprecedented rates of childhood obesity. Obesity and diabetes portend other chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke and cancer, so these are ominous findings, but, the behavioral news is much better.

Smoking rates continue to decline, whittling away at the nation’s single leading cause of premature death, physical activity rates are rising, all that’s missing from this mix is evidence that dietary patterns are improving.

Source: http://news.yahoo.com/
Health Tip: Get Enough Calcium

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics offers these suggestions to get more calcium in your diet, without adding too much Fat:

- Sprinkle your salad or soup with fat-free or low-fat shredded cheese
- Enjoy low-fat or fat-free yogurt or cottage cheese with some fruit
- Beef up breakfast by adding low-fat or fat-free milk to oatmeal, or low-fat cheese to an omelet
- Have a latte made with low-fat or fat-free milk
- Sip on a smoothie made with low-fat or fat-free milk or yogurt, along with some fruit

Source: http://news.yahoo.com/

5 tips to survive extreme heat

The number of national heat advisories is rising almost as fast as the temperature. Here are some strategies used to stay cool: Adapt them to fit your needs whether you’re outside all day or working in your garden for the afternoon.

1. Hydration is key
   Hydrating at frequent times is critical, rather than waiting until you’re at your maximum thirst. The minute you think you need a drink, stop and take the drink right then.

2. Drink cool - not cold – water
   This distinction makes all the difference.

3. Start early
   If you’re working outside, make every effort to start before the sun comes up or at least before it’s reached its peak.

4. Stay wet
   If you notice that somebody has stopped sweating, recognize it as the first sign of heat exhaustion. No matter what that individual is doing, he/she needs to go sit in the shade, sip some water- just sip it, don’t chug it- and stay in the shade. When working with metal roofing, bring a hose up and douses your-self with water to stay cool.

5. Dress strategically
   It is also recommend you wear long sleeves, and wears light colors to reflect the sun. Even the color of your footwear is significant white shoes versus dark shoes could mean the difference between having cool feet and feeling like you have blisters.

Source: http://thechart.blogs.cnn.com/