



Stay young – with help from table tennis!

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Table tennis makes your brain grow and improves your emotional wellbeing – as revealed by a primetime BBC1 programme.

How to Stay Young, shown on the channel last night, examined ways to keep our brains healthy as we age, and our sport played a key role.

Two groups of people aged over 60 were assigned to either walking or table tennis sessions, participating twice a week for one hour over a 10-week period.

The table tennis players were put through their paces at the Bounce venue in London by coaches Mariola Hyzyk and Olav Stahl.

They were tested and underwent brain scans at the beginning and end of the 10 weeks to analyse how their brains had changed physically, how their mental and memory skills had changed and how they rated their emotional well-being. The results were compared with those of the walking group.

[If you have been inspired by How to Stay Young, click here to find out more about where you can play table tennis](#)

The tests were supervised by Dr Matthew Kempton at King's College, London, who said: "Table tennis is a very interesting activity to look at because we know it's very fast-moving, there's a competitive angle and there's hand-eye co-ordination in there as well.

"We think that might lead to changes in blood flow to the brain and changes in cognition as well."

The results showed that both table tennis players and walkers had improved scores on the cognitive tests at the end of the 10 weeks, with the walkers scoring higher – possibly because they had exerted themselves more, according to Dr Kempton.

The brain scans showed both groups also had more neurons in the hippocampus, associated with better memory and ability to learn.

Most notably, the table tennis players showed an increase in the thickness of their cortex – the part of the brain associated with complex thinking and the part which shrinks most as we age. Dr Kempton said this was due to connections between brain cells increasing – which is the result of learning a new skill.

Table tennis participants also had fewer negative emotions than the walkers and participants agreed they felt better for having taken part in exercise in a social group – one man said he felt a lot less depressed because of table tennis and another said: “We felt better for it, we had a great time.”

The programme also included footage from the European Veterans’ Championships held in Tampere, Finland, last year. English competitors spoke of how the sport helps them to stay agile and sharp-minded.

The programme’s findings were no surprise to Tony Shapps, who runs a series of coaching sessions for University of the Third Age (U3A) in Hertfordshire.

“I thought it was interesting,” he said. “Table tennis got a fair amount of coverage, even though it was a medical programme at its heart.

“There’s no question I see an improvement in people I coach and they are a really jolly crowd. I had one chap who had Alzheimer’s and he certainly improved for a period.

“I think we’ll get more interest as a result of this programme.”

If you missed the programme, which was presented by Angela Rippon and Dr Chris van Tulleken and also included sections on diet and medical science, you can watch it on iPlayer by [clicking here](#) – it is available until 10pm on May 14.

- Table Tennis England provides opportunities to charities and organisations who work with people with disabilities or impairments to access subsidised tables and equipments. [Click here for more information](#)

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