

# Something to think about...

I would like to talk with you about the brain, what it is for and how to look after it.

The other day I just could not remember the name of a movie star in a certain film..and the next day when I was cleaning it just came to me (it was Michael Caine of course). Then my John came to me - he couldn't remember why he had gone to a room and what he had to get. Fortunately he did remember Mother's day for his Mum. My John then had a couple of glasses of wine..his brain was not working well after that and he became quite silly. It can be quite normal to forget things and also be silly sometimes.

## What is the brain for?

The brain is for thinking, working things out, remembering things to do, remembering faces, remembering where things are, working out money, doing your job, and making you happy and sad; it is to help you see and hear and talk. It also makes you behave in a certain way and to be sensible.

## What is the anatomy of the brain?

(Remember that anatomy means what is it made of and where is it). You already know the brain is inside your head. It is soft and squishy but protected by your head bones, the skull. The brain has several different parts. The front part of your brain behind the eyes and forehead helps you behave well, have friends and be sensible. The side parts of the brain behind your ears is for memory. The back part of your brain is for your eyes. But inside the brain there are all sorts of links between the different parts. The brain itself is made of cells, and the cells have long stems that link with other cells and messages pass from one cell to another.

## Why am I forgetting things lately?

When we get older our thinking is not as good as when we are young, this can be normal. As we get older our brains get smaller and the links between the parts of the brain are not as strong. Sometime we lose so many brain cells and the brain gets so small that we can get forgetful and don't know how to behave properly. Some but not all people with Down syndrome start to lose their memory in their mid 50s. This is earlier than in people without Down syndrome. If this happens the person usually needs some extra help at home. This condition is called dementia.

## I am 35 years old with Down syndrome and am forgetting things- could I be getting dementia?

Not necessarily, especially if you are under 50 years old. If you feel that you cannot think properly it could be due to a number of things. Dementia usually does not begin before you are 55 years or so, and you may never get this condition. I know a patient with Down syndrome who is in her 80s and she is as bright as a button. But talk with your doctor about these things below that can make you tired, forgetful and not think straight; once you sort these out you might be back on track to thinking well.

## Things that can make thinking foggy

- Certain medications
- Health problems such as infection or a cold
- Under or over active thyroid
- Not enough vitamins and minerals
- Not enough sleep (eg sleep apnea)
- A heart problem
- Stress or an emotional shock such as grief
- Boredom
- Depression and being very sad, anxiety
- Too many changes
- Epilepsy
- Pain

## How do I keep my brain healthy and thinking well?

- Exercise your mind- try something new every week
- Play games, do puzzles and craft; practice reading and arithmetic
- Do a numeracy and literacy course
- Look after your health and have a check up every year
- Make sure your health conditions are treated well
- Do physical exercise every day
- Keep active and don't sit for too long
- Talk to other people
- Eat healthily and not too much
- Ask your doctor to check your medications
- Don't watch too much TV
- Get plenty of sleep
- Think up tricks to play, tell jokes

So just as you need to look after your muscles and bones to keep fit- you must also look after your brain..have plenty of practice in thinking.

Associate Professor Robyn A. Wallace.

SHAID\* Clinics,

\*Specialist Healthcare for Adults with Intellectual Disability

Mater Staff Specialist Private Practice Clinic,

Mater Public Hospital, Raymond, Terrace, South Brisbane, 4101

Pager 07 3836 3526

SHAID clinic for adults with Down syndrome is held the second Thursday of every month at the Mater Hospital.