Be Active and Make Healthy Lifestyle Choices

Being active is strongly linked to healthy aging and staying independent. Being active helps people maintain their physical and cognitive function throughout life, and helps older adults to develop fewer chronic conditions.

Studies of aging have shown a link between increased physical activity and:
- Reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, and some types of cancer
- Better thinking and memory compared to those who are not active
- Increased brain size in areas that are key to memory function and increased blood flow to the brain, which helps your body and your brain

Lifestyle choices that help your heart health also help your brain health.
- Heart healthy choices like quitting smoking and eating a healthy diet may reduce your risk of dementia and help with clear thinking
- And, drinking less alcohol may reduce harm to your brain – prolonged moderate to heavy drinking has been shown to harm the brain

What you can do:
- Move – the best exercise is the one you will do; visit www.move.va.gov
- Even small increases in activity can have big benefits, so plan to move MORE than you do now – you do not need to begin by joining a gym or lifting weights
- Talk with your doctor or therapist to find safe activities for you. Some ideas:
  - Start by walking more – work up to 30 minutes a day most days of the week
  - Ride a bike instead of driving, when you can
  - When you sit for a long time, take a break to get up and move every hour
  - Get a pedometer to count your steps then set a goal and work up to it slowly – there are many free pedometer apps for smart phones
  - Do chair exercises if you are not able to walk or must sit for a long time
  - Let go of “all or nothing” thinking – forgive yourself if you miss a day of being active and get back on track the next day
  - Try to include both aerobic activities (like swimming or dancing) and strength building (like climbing stairs or heavy gardening) in your routine
  - Exercise with a buddy or join a group – many VA clinics offer classes and support
  - If you smoke, think about quitting – the VA also offers many programs to help