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Exercise and the Brain: KU Medical Center Collaborating with the YMCA in Innovative Study

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Is exercise good for your brain? If so, how much is needed to boost your memory and brain power? -- These are the questions being asked in a new study at the University of Kansas School of Medicine.

The KU Alzheimer and Memory Program, led by Jeffrey M. Burns, MD, has received a $780,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health to study the effect of different "doses" of exercise on the brain in healthy adults over the age of 65.

"Physical exercise may represent an important strategy for combating the rise of age-related disorders such as Alzheimer's disease," said Dr. Burns. "This study will be an important step to more precisely define the optimal amount of exercise to promote healthy brain aging."

Evidence from studies in animals suggests that physical exercise may improve aspects of memory and thinking, but rigorous studies in humans are lacking.

The KU Alzheimer and Memory Program is collaborating with the Greater Kansas City YMCA to conduct the one--year study. A total of 100 participants who are not already exercising will be assigned to one of four groups to assess the cognitive benefits of varying amounts of exercise.

"Unlike with medications, we do not know the minimum effective amount of exercise needed for brain benefits, nor do we know if increasing amounts of exercise provide greater benefits," said Dr. Burns.

Most participants will participate in a six-month exercise program under the supervision of YMCA exercise trainers, while some will be asked to continue their current level of physical activity. Exercising participants will receive a YMCA membership and the services of an exercise trainer free-of-charge. Comprehensive examinations of memory and thinking will occur before and after the six-month exercise program and again six months later to assess the impact of varying levels of exercise on brain function.

Last year, the KU Alzheimer and Memory Program received international attention after reporting that higher levels of physical fitness may slow the brain shrinkage seen in Alzheimer's disease.

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"Our prior studies suggest that maintaining fitness through exercise may slow changes in brain structure associated with Alzheimer's disease. This study takes these important observations to the next level by rigorously testing how and why exercise impacts the brain and by defining the optimal amount of exercise for maximizing brain benefits," said Dr. Burns.

For more information or to participate in this innovative study, visit www.KUAlzheimer.org or call (913)-588-0555.