Everyone forgets something from time to time. Whether it's misplacing car keys or missing a doctor's appointment, no man or woman is immune from forgetful moments.

For some men and women, however, memory loss goes beyond routine forgetfulness. Should men and women find themselves growing increasingly forgetful, there are ways to improve memory, regardless of an individual's age. Thanks to the human brain's ability to adapt and change, men and women can improve their memories by employing a few simple strategies and exercises.

—Routinely get a good night's sleep. The brain needs adequate sleep to operate at full capacity. For students, it's important to keep in mind that without adequate sleep, the brain's ability to solve problems or think critically is greatly compromised.

Research has shown that essential memory-enhancing activity occurs during the deepest stages of sleep. Men and women both young and old can improve memory by routinely getting a good night's sleep.

—Exercise. Exercise is beneficial in many ways, but men and women might not know the effects routine exercise can have on memory. Exercise increases the flow of oxygen to the brain, which reduces the risk for disorders that can lead to memory loss. Cardiovascular exercise that increases oxygen flow to the brain can reduce risk for stroke and diabetes while simultaneously improving memory.

—Work to reduce stress. Stress is harmful in a number of ways, and memory loss is no exception. The hippocampus is a region of the brain thought to be responsible for memory. When men and women are stressed and do nothing to positively address that stress, the hippocampus is damaged, negatively affecting the brain's ability to form new memories.

Men and women can reduce stress in a number of ways, including daily exercise and eating a healthy diet. In addition, coping with stress in a healthy way, such as through exercise or even meditation, and not through unhealthy, harmful channels like consuming alcohol or overeating, can greatly improve quality of life and help improve memory as well.

—Eat right. What people eat can also impact what they remember. An unhealthy diet can be just as harmful to the brain as it can be to the rest of the body. While it's best to discuss any potential dietary changes with a physician first, look for foods that are not high in saturated fat. Foods high in saturated fat increase a person's risk of dementia and make it harder for a person to concentrate and remember things.

Other foods that researchers are finding to be brain-friendly are those that contain omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fatty acids are especially beneficial to brain health and researchers feel they might also help a person lower his or her risk for Alzheimer's disease. Men and women can take omega-3 supplements or look for foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, including fish like salmon, tuna, halibut and trout.

Men and women looking to improve memory should also start including more fruits and vegetables in their daily diets. Fruits and vegetables are loaded with antioxidants, which protect brain cells. Green vegetables like spinach and broccoli and fruits like apricots and even watermelon are rich in antioxidants that can help men and women protect their brain cells and improve memory at the same time.

Memory loss is often seen as an inevitable side effect of aging. However, people can take several steps that improve memory and overall health at the same time.

Holyoke Enterprise March 1, 2012