HOME

Scientists Discover Daytime Napping May Keep Your Brain Up to 6.5 Years Younger, Study Finds

By bestfolkmedicine · 22/11/2026 · 10 min read



Could a simple afternoon nap help protect your brain from aging? Scientists have discovered a surprising connection between regular daytime napping and brain health, suggesting that people genetically predisposed to nap may have larger brains — equivalent to approximately 2.6 to 6.5 fewer years of age-related brain shrinkage.

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For years, afternoon naps have been associated with relaxation, improved energy, and better concentration. But research suggests that napping may offer benefits extending beyond simply feeling refreshed.

A major study published in the scientific journal *Sleep Health* on June 19, 2023, found that people genetically predisposed to habitual daytime napping tended to have greater total brain volume than those without the same predisposition.

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The findings have attracted attention because brain volume naturally decreases with age, and accelerated brain shrinkage can be associated with cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases.

However, researchers emphasize that their results do not mean taking a daily nap has been proven to reverse brain aging or prevent dementia.

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Instead, the study offers intriguing evidence that daytime sleep habits may play a role in maintaining long-term brain health.

The Study That Sparked Worldwide Attention

The investigation was conducted by researchers from University College London (UCL), the University of the Republic in Uruguay, and collaborating institutions.

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Scientists analyzed genetic and health information from the UK Biobank, one of the world's largest biomedical research databases.

The study included data from as many as 378,932 participants, with an average age of approximately 57 years.

Rather than simply comparing people who reported taking naps with those who did not, researchers used a sophisticated statistical technique known as Mendelian randomization.

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This approach examines genetic variations associated with certain behaviors — in this case, habitual daytime napping — to investigate whether those behaviors might influence health outcomes.

Researchers examined 92 genetic variants previously associated with daytime napping.

They then investigated whether genetic predisposition to napping was associated with differences in brain structure and cognitive performance.

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The findings were particularly interesting.

People genetically predisposed to nap regularly had, on average, approximately 15.8 cubic centimeters more total brain volume.

Researchers estimated that this difference was comparable to approximately 2.6 to 6.5 years of age-related brain-volume decline.

This was not a direct measurement of how many years younger participants' brains were functioning. It was an estimate based on differences in brain size observed during normal aging.

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Nevertheless, it raised an important possibility: habitual daytime napping could contribute to preserving brain structure later in life.

Why Brain Volume Matters as We Age

The human brain naturally changes throughout adulthood.

Beginning in early and middle adulthood, certain brain regions gradually lose volume as part of the normal aging process.

These changes can involve reductions in gray matter, alterations in white matter, and changes in the connections that allow brain cells to communicate.

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Although some brain shrinkage is expected with age, excessive or accelerated loss can be associated with neurological problems.

Researchers have linked reduced brain volume to several conditions, including Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

Brain volume is not, however, a perfect indicator of cognitive health.

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A larger brain does not automatically mean someone has better memory, greater intelligence, or a lower risk of developing dementia.

Still, maintaining healthy brain structure is considered an important aspect of neurological aging.

This is why researchers were interested in discovering whether a common daily habit, such as taking a nap, might be associated with differences in brain volume.

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What Does the 6.5-Year Difference Actually Mean?

The most widely shared finding from the study is that daytime napping could be associated with brains that appear up to 6.5 years younger.

But the scientific explanation is more nuanced.

Researchers did not follow participants for 6.5 years and observe that their brains stopped aging.

They also did not randomly assign participants to nap every afternoon and measure whether the habit prevented brain shrinkage.

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Instead, they compared an estimated difference in total brain volume with typical rates of age-related brain-volume loss.

The observed difference was equivalent to approximately 2.6 to 6.5 years of normal brain aging.

In other words, people with a genetic tendency toward habitual napping showed a structural brain difference corresponding to several years of typical age-related volume decline.

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The findings suggest a possible protective relationship, but further research is needed to establish whether intentionally introducing naps produces the same effect.

Could Napping Help Protect Against Dementia?

One of the most important questions raised by this research is whether habitual napping could help reduce the risk of dementia.

Dementia affects millions of people worldwide and is characterized by progressive difficulties with memory, reasoning, communication, and everyday functioning.

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Because accelerated brain shrinkage is associated with several neurodegenerative conditions, scientists are interested in lifestyle factors that might help preserve brain structure.

Sleep is particularly important because it supports several biological processes involved in maintaining brain health.

During sleep, the brain consolidates memories, regulates cellular activity, and participates in processes that help maintain a healthy neurological environment.

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However, the 2023 study did not demonstrate that daytime napping prevents Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of dementia.

The researchers also found no clear association between genetic predisposition to habitual napping and better performance on tests of reaction time or visual memory.

This means that although participants showed differences in total brain volume, those structural differences were not accompanied by measurable improvements in the cognitive abilities examined.

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Further long-term research is needed to determine whether napping affects the risk of developing neurodegenerative diseases.

What Happens to Your Brain During a Short Nap?

Even without evidence that naps prevent dementia, shorter periods of daytime sleep have demonstrated benefits for alertness and mental performance.

A brief nap can provide an opportunity for the brain to recover from prolonged wakefulness.

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During the day, pressure to sleep gradually increases as the body remains awake.

Taking a short nap may temporarily reduce this pressure, helping people feel more alert afterward.

Research suggests that daytime naps can offer several potential benefits.

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1. Improved Memory and Learning

Sleep plays an important role in memory consolidation, the process through which recently acquired information becomes more stable.

Some studies have found that napping after learning can improve the retention of certain types of information.

The effect varies depending on nap duration, sleep stage, and the specific memory task.

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2. Better Concentration and Alertness

A short daytime nap can help restore alertness, especially during the natural afternoon decline in energy.

People who are sleep-deprived may experience improvements in attention and performance after napping.

However, naps cannot fully compensate for consistently inadequate nighttime sleep.

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3. Reduced Mental Fatigue

Prolonged wakefulness can contribute to mental exhaustion, slower responses, and reduced concentration.

A brief nap may help people return to their activities feeling more refreshed.

4. Emotional Regulation

Sleep supports brain systems involved in emotional processing and stress regulation.

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Some experimental studies suggest that napping may improve aspects of emotional functioning, although the effects are not consistent across all populations.

How Long Should You Nap for the Best Results?

The 2023 brain-volume study did not establish an ideal nap duration.

Researchers examined genetic predisposition to habitual napping rather than testing specific nap lengths.

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However, previous research offers practical guidance.

10–20

minutes

Short power nap

Often useful for restoring alertness with a relatively low risk of waking up groggy.

30–60

minutes

Moderate nap

May support certain memory processes but can increase the likelihood of sleep inertia, the groggy feeling experienced after waking.

90

minutes

Longer nap

May include a more complete sleep cycle but can interfere with nighttime sleep, especially if taken late in the afternoon.

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For many healthy adults, a brief nap of approximately 10 to 20 minutes in the early afternoon is a reasonable starting point.

The best duration depends on individual sleep needs, daily schedules, and nighttime sleep quality.

Is Napping Every Day Healthy?

Not everyone needs to nap.

Some individuals naturally feel refreshed throughout the day, while others experience a strong afternoon dip in alertness.

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Occasional short naps can be a normal part of a healthy routine.

However, frequent or unusually long daytime naps can sometimes indicate underlying health concerns.

For example, persistent daytime sleepiness may be associated with sleep apnea, insufficient nighttime sleep, medication effects, or other medical conditions.

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Some observational studies have also reported associations between prolonged daytime napping and poorer health outcomes.

Importantly, these associations do not necessarily mean that napping causes disease. People with underlying medical problems may simply need more daytime rest.

A new or unexplained increase in daytime sleepiness deserves medical evaluation, especially when accompanied by loud snoring, breathing interruptions during sleep, or persistent fatigue.

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The Best Time of Day to Take a Nap

For most people following a conventional daytime schedule, early afternoon is a suitable time to nap.

The body's circadian rhythm naturally produces a period of reduced alertness during this part of the day.

Napping too late may make it more difficult to fall asleep at night, particularly for individuals who already struggle with insomnia.

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The following habits may help make naps more restorative:

- Choose an early-afternoon time, often between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m.
- Keep the room quiet, comfortable, and relatively dark.
- Set an alarm to avoid unintentionally sleeping too long.
- Avoid relying on naps to compensate for chronic nighttime sleep deprivation.
- Maintain a consistent nighttime sleep schedule.

Adults generally need approximately seven to nine hours of sleep per night, although individual requirements vary.

What Are the Limitations of the Research?

Although the findings are promising, several important limitations should be considered.

First, the study relied on genetic variants associated with self-reported daytime napping. Researchers did not directly test an intervention in which participants were instructed to begin taking regular naps.

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Second, the UK Biobank population consisted primarily of middle-aged and older adults of European ancestry, which may limit how well the findings apply to other populations.

Third, the relationship between genetic predisposition and actual napping behavior is complex. Genetic variants may influence additional biological characteristics that complicate causal interpretation.

Fourth, the study did not establish the ideal frequency, timing, or duration of naps.

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Finally, the researchers found an association with total brain volume but not with hippocampal volume, visual memory, or reaction time.

Therefore, the results should be interpreted as evidence of a potentially beneficial relationship between habitual napping and brain structure, not definitive proof that naps delay neurological aging.

Could a Simple Daily Habit Become Part of Healthy Brain Aging?

The idea that daytime naps might contribute to long-term brain health is compelling because napping is inexpensive, accessible, and generally safe for many adults.

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Unlike complicated wellness programs or costly interventions, a brief afternoon rest requires little more than a quiet environment and a few minutes of uninterrupted time.

Nevertheless, healthy brain aging depends on many factors.

Consistent nighttime sleep, regular physical activity, cardiovascular health, balanced nutrition, meaningful social interaction, and management of chronic conditions all contribute to long-term neurological well-being.

Napping may complement these habits, but it should not replace them.

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The most important message from the study is that scientists are discovering increasingly complex relationships between sleep patterns and the physical structure of the brain.

Final Thoughts

The research published in *Sleep Health* suggests that habitual daytime napping may be associated with larger total brain volume, corresponding to approximately 2.6 to 6.5 fewer years of typical age-related brain shrinkage.

That is an intriguing finding, especially as scientists search for practical ways to promote healthy brain aging.

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However, the study does not prove that taking daily naps reverses aging, improves memory, or prevents dementia.

For people who enjoy short afternoon naps, the findings offer another reason to appreciate the potential benefits of daytime rest.

For those who rarely nap, there is no compelling evidence that forcing themselves to sleep during the day will make their brains younger.

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Ultimately, the strongest approach remains prioritizing sufficient, high-quality sleep and maintaining healthy daily habits.

And perhaps the most interesting question is this: Could a simple afternoon nap turn out to be one of the easiest ways to support brain health as we grow older?

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