The Benefits of Reading
by Laura Whitehead

Reading is a leisure activity like none other. It is a great way to learn about new people, places, and things. It increases your vocabulary, creativity, flexibility, writing skills, and empathy. It is quiet, takes very little space, is completely portable, and through the use of your library, is completely free. Reading also happens to be very good for your health.

In 2009, Mindlab International conducted an experiment at the University of Sussex to determine which activities were best at relieving stress. Volunteers tried a variety of activities, including playing video games, listening to music, taking a walk, having a cup of tea (or coffee), and reading. Reading was the most effective at reducing stress levels, reducing stress by 68 percent. After silently reading for only six minutes, the volunteers experienced lower heart rates and the tension in their muscles was greatly reduced.

A study published in the journal Neurology showed that reading slows cognitive decline and reduces the incidence of Alzheimer's and dementia as people age. While any form of mental activity had some protective effects, reading was 30 percent more effective than other forms of mental activity.

Another interesting discovery from this 2013 study was that reading provided memory protection even to those individuals who had plaques and tangles in their brains, which are normally the physical signs that mark memory decline. Researchers believe this is because reading creates additional connections between brain cells. As an individual develops plaques and tangles in their brains, these additional connections are able to compensate for the normal memory declines that would accompany such physical changes.

Reading can reduce sleep problems. Watching TV, using a computer, or looking at a phone screen stimulates your brain before bed and makes it harder for you to fall asleep. The National Sleep Foundation says that the artificial blue light given off by these devices is to blame and over time can lead to chronic sleep deficiency. In contrast, those who read before bed fall asleep faster and enjoy a more restful sleep.

Reading is also good for your mental health. Reading has positive effects on individuals with anxiety or depression. In the United Kingdom, doctors prescribe books to assist their patients who are struggling with mental illness. They even have a name for it, bibliotherapy. Many patients note improvement in their symptoms after the bibliotherapy.

All of these benefits add up to a longer life for those who spend time reading. A 2016 study conducted by Yale University researchers and published in Social Science and Medicine demonstrated a strong correlation between reading and longer life spans. Those individuals who read books for more than 3.5 hours per week lived 23 months longer than those individuals who didn't read any books. That only averages out to be a half hour per day of reading.

If you want to do something healthy for yourself, stop by the library, pick up a good book, and start enjoying the many benefits of reading.