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### Aging Japanese Keep Their Minds Moving

Affluence, Long Life Fuel Sales of Games, Books and Tours to Exercise the Brain

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TOKYO -- Every night, just before hopping into bed, Sachiko Sakurai plays a video game on a handheld console she recently bought. But Sakurai is not a child fixated on digital entertainment. She is 62 years old and looking forward to the birth of her first grandchild two months from now.

"I never imagined I would play an electronic game," Sakurai said. "But I'm enjoying this."

What she plays is a brain-exercise game, Atama Scan, part of a broad range of mental acuity products that are all the rage in [Japan](#): books, toys, food and other things, sold with the pledge that they can reenergize aging brains.

Brain-Exercise Origami is on sale. Seniors can take a Brain-Training Tour. Brain books line the shelves in the senior-care section of stores. And toy robots are offered for sale with such claims as "Patting this robot can stave off aging."

Japan is the fastest-aging nation in the world, with among the longest average life spans, 85 years for women and 79 for men. Combine those demographics with affluence and the result is a major market and a senior phenomenon. It doesn't matter that many mainstream medical researchers say the products have questionable practical effect.

Municipal governments are offering mental exercise programs for the elderly as part of efforts to lower the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and alleviating the ever-increasing payout for senior nursing care insurance.

Krume city in southern Japan has a recollection class in which elderly residents gather in a room equipped with an old-fashioned kitchen table and dozens of items from the 1950s. The idea is to re-create the atmosphere of a half-century ago to help them remember youthful experiences. Aged minds can be energized when recalling past times, according to a city official.

Analysts said the current brain-training trend began in 2004 and 2005 when video games such as Sega Toys Co.'s Brain Trainer and Nintendo Co.'s Brain Age became smash hits. Since its launch, Brain Age for Nintendo's DS console has sold 6.7 million copies around the world, including 3.4 million in Japan.

"I want to keep my mind strong and healthy," said Sakurai, who operates a senior-care business in Saitama prefecture, north of Tokyo, and understands the hardships suffered by dementia patients.

Both games, which include simple math and word quizzes, rendered globally famous the name of Ryuta Kawashima, a neuroscientist who supervised development of the games. The professor at Tohoku University is also the writer of a collection of best-selling brain-exercise workbooks that came out in 2003.

Kawashima compiled the workbooks based on research he conducted at a senior-care home in Fukuoka prefecture. He has reported that simple calculation and reading activate the brain's prefrontal area in some people, resulting in an improvement in cognitive function.

"The symptoms of Alzheimer's disease improved, and that's a significant milestone in dementia research," Kawashima said in a telephone interview.

Kawashima said the games' popularity reflects Japan's stage of economic development. "The era of pursuing material wealth ended, and public attention is turning to mental health," he said.

On the heels of Brain Age and Brain Trainer, Nintendo and Sega released second-generation versions of the games, and other makers have turned out one copycat after another over the past two years. On the back of the package is always a photo of a doctor who is listed as having devised or endorsed the product.

An economic think tank, Yano Research Institute, predicts that sales of brain-exercise games will jump 39.4 percent this year, to 23 billion yen, about \$195 million, said Mika Fukuoka, an analyst at the institute.

Last fall, Ritsuko Isozaki joined the Brain-Training Tour, organized by JTB Health Tourism Institute, and visited a "brain-training" center in a mountain resort in Nagano prefecture. After having her brain age assessed with a computer game, the 65-year-old retiree said, she took part in trekking, dinner and hot spring bathing, all of which the institute claimed would "strengthen" her brain.

Hiking backwards and walking sideways like a crab were part of the workout program. The organizer said it developed the tour under the supervision of experts in psychology and neuroscience.

A maker of stationery has created coloring notebooks and pens for the elderly, touting them as good for their brains. Reading classes are available for the elderly at adult education schools, which say reading aloud can keep minds youthful.

A professor in Wakayama prefecture published a book titled "Radio Can Train Your Brains," while a research group in western Japan released its findings: "Tapping drums can activate brain functions."

But many experts say there is often no medical basis for the claims the emerging industry makes about its products. "Mental exercises might delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease," at best, but would "not stop the development of the disease," said Heii Arai, a professor at Juntendo University's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science.

Chiaki Ura, a researcher at the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology, said, "The mechanism of Alzheimer's disease has not been clarified, and people are testing various regimens."

Citing recent studies on an Alzheimer's vaccine that have produced promising results, she said, "If the envisioned vaccine becomes available, that would end the brain-exercise craze."

But until then, the fad seems unlikely to wane quickly.