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Section: Today's Headlines

How fit is your brain?

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GROTON — Are you good at catching flies? If you see them crawling on a computer screen, how fast could you hit them with a virtual swatter?

How about word puzzles like Wheel of Fortune? Could you fill in blanks to finish a proverb quickly?

Council on Aging member Frank Belitsky, 88, can't wait to find out how he'll do when he hits the brain-fitness gym — as the room where special computers are to be installed will be called — at the Groton Senior Center as early as next month.

Like anyone else, whenever he can't find his car keys, Belitsky wonders what it might be like to lose his memory.

And Paul Raia, a psychologist who serves the Alzheimer's Association as vice president of patient care, believes computer games designed to stimulate the brain's cognitive functions can help ward off Alzheimer's disease and slow memory loss. Several studies suggest the games, along with physical exercise, adequate diet and social engagement, help build connections between brain cells, he said.

"It's ahead of the curve," Raia said of the senior center's move to get the computer program.

The Groton Senior Center is preparing to install My **Vigorous Mind**, a computer program designed to prevent memory loss. Developed by neuropsychologists and scientists specializing in dementia and Alzheimer's disease, the program targets important cognitive skills, such as processing of memory, speed, attention, reasoning and perception, according to Yuval Malinsky, chief executive officer of **Vigorous Mind** in Newton, the company that produces the software.

Seniors can play various word and picture games by directly touching the computer screens. They also can socialize by competing for scores against each other.

"It's a wave of the future," Groton Senior Center Director Martha Campbell.

More consumers began showing interest in brain-fitness software in the past year, and many companies are entering the market, according to Betsy Percoski, vice president of communications for the Alzheimer's Association in Massachusetts.

Nintendo currently markets a game for its popular DS system called Brain Age, which is designed to keep cognitive functions quick as a whip and the brain young.

"It's definitely a trend," Percoski said.

Many people say the idea of losing their memories or sense of identity is scarier than developing cancer, Percoski said. And software developers are banking on the technical savviness of baby boomers, Campbell said.

My **Vigorous Mind** was first developed in Austria, specifically with seniors in mind. Four-hundred assisted-living facilities throughout Austria, Germany and Switzerland now use the software, and the company adapted it for the U.S. market. Although the software is popular among retirement communities and assisted-living centers, Groton is the first community in New England to order its installation at its senior center, according to Malinsky.

Because of that, the company offered the software to the local senior center free for the first year on the condition that each user will make a \$2 donation toward the 20-minute program every time it's used. If successful, the Council on Aging plans to raise money to pay for the program for the second year without using tax dollars.

Games include Catch Me If You Can, a fly-swatting game, as well as a puzzle that requires you to look at a picture torn into pieces and identify added pieces that came from another picture. Another game lets you memorize objects on cards and figure out where they were after the cards are flipped facedown. The company also is building a database of old photos of cities and towns across the country to allow seniors to see and remember their childhood and talk about it.

Campbell, former activity director of Fair Haven Nursing Home and D'Youville Senior Care Center in Lowell, said seniors with memory problems enjoy trivia questions because they tend to lose short-term memory before long-term memory. Those who can't remember that what they are eating is called "salad" could easily recite lyrics of "My Wild Irish Rose," she said.

Campbell said she hopes My **Vigorous Mind** will help these seniors stay in that stage longer, before losing their memories entirely.

For more information about My **Vigorous Mind**, visit <http://www.vigorousmind.com>.

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