Staying physically active may help older adults think on their feet nearly as well as they did when they were young.

The ability to choose quickly among several possible actions, called executive control function, normally seems to decline with age. Executive control requires more processing by the brain than automatic activities that are done with little if any conscious thought, such as stepping on the gas when the red light turns green. When the red light turns green and then a person steps out into the intersection, the driver has to both stop the automatic action—stepping on the gas—and do something different—slam on the brakes. That’s when executive control comes into play.

After dividing 24 older adults into groups according to their usual level of physical activity, the researchers tested their executive control functions while monitoring the electrical activity in their brains. The same tests were done on eight young adults. The highly active older men and women were able to process information nearly as quickly as the younger adults. But those in the low and moderately active groups lagged behind, says Charles H. Hillman, professor of kinesiology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He presented his findings recently at the annual meeting of the American College of Sports Medicine.