



### The Brain and Aging

As we age, our bodies change, and it is common to notice changes in thinking too. Remembering, making decisions, organizing and planning can get harder. You've probably noticed older adults struggling to find words, remember names and do multiple things at once.

It is normal for these changes to occur. With age, certain parts of the brain begin to shrink, blood flow to the brain may decrease and communication between nerve cells may be reduced.

Through a healthy diet and other ways to feed the brain (see box), it is possible to give your brain what it needs to do more, for longer.

## Food for Thought

### Healthy Food and Other Ways to Feed Your Brain

Our brains never rest. They hold down a highly specialized 24/7 job. As one of our largest and most complex organs, the brain contains more than 100 billion nerves that communicate through synapses, or connections, to control thinking, breathing, memory, sleep, hearing, digestion, feelings, heart rate, and so much more. Think of your brain as your body's command center; it controls everything! Weighing just 3 pounds, the brain has a hefty job.

Did you realize that your lifestyle has a big impact on the health of your brain? Your eating and sleeping patterns, how you manage stress, how much you exercise and how you socialize can either nourish your brain or stress it. While we can't change our age or genetics, we can adopt healthy habits to have a positive effect on our brain.

Studies show improvements in brain health with a Mediterranean-style diet that's rich in vegetables and fruits, fish, whole grains, nuts and "good" fats. Dr Jonathan Graff-Radford, MD from the Mayo Clinic says that research suggests that people who eat a Mediterranean-style diet are less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease (the most common type of dementia) than people who don't. Eating healthy foods can lower cholesterol, lower blood sugar levels and improve blood vessel health. The improvements can help slow down memory loss and boost thinking power. Let's get specific

about the best brain foods to eat every day:

- Green leafy vegetables (spinach, collards, kale and broccoli) contain vitamin K, folate, lutein and beta carotene. Legumes (lentils, chick peas, peas and beans) are vegetables too, and great sources of protein, B vitamins and fiber. Practically every vegetable is healthy, but French fries aren't!
- Fruits offer a healthy way to have a sweet treat. Blueberries, blackberries and raspberries are loaded with antioxidants, the substances that protect cells from damage. Cherries (and berries) contain flavonoids which are the antioxidants that give these fruits their rich color. Strawberries, apples with skin, grapes, oranges and many other fruits are all healthy options.
- Fatty fish like salmon, cod, canned tuna and pollack are rich in omega-3 fatty acids (healthy unsaturated fats that the body can't make so they must be gotten from food). Omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to slow memory problems, prevent heart disease and stroke, and help control many other conditions.
- Whole grains, including oats, barley, brown rice and quinoa, are rich sources of B vitamins.

### Feeding the Brain

Besides adopting a healthy diet, there are other ways to feed the brain. Having social connections with family and friends and staying involved in activities that interest you can keep your brain humming. Working on crossword puzzles or other challenging brain games exercises the brain's "muscle." You are never too old to pick up a new skill like learning mahjong, playing Sudoku or using an elliptical machine. Walking or other types of exercise for 30 minutes at least 3 times a week, deep breathing and meditation help increase blood flow to the brain, relieve stress and pave the way for a good night's rest.

Speaking of sleep, maintaining good sleep habits help your brain restore and rebuild after a busy day. Sleep and these other activities have been shown to maintain and repair nerve cells in the brain and improve communication between the brain and the rest of the body.

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- Nuts are excellent sources of protein, healthy fats and fiber. Walnuts are especially high in a type of omega-3 fatty acid that can help lower blood pressure. Almonds, pecans, pistachios and other nuts are easy to take on the go and are filling too.
- Healthy unsaturated oils like olive, avocado, canola and flaxseed oils can be used to sauté vegetables and dress salads.
- Turmeric, cinnamon, ginger and other herbs and spices that contain antioxidants can decrease inflammation and give color and flavor to foods.
- Black coffee and green/black tea are linked to improved memory since they contain brain-boosting antioxidants.
- Red wine and dark chocolate can be enjoyed in moderation for brain health. Red wine contains an antioxidant called resveratrol which has been linked to reducing cell damage and risk of developing dementia. Recommended daily limits per day are 1 glass for women, 2 glasses for men. Red grape juice can be substituted for wine but watch for added sugars. The flavonoids in dark chocolate (72% cocoa) are believed to improve blood flow to the brain.
- Enriched, bleached or refined flour, such as those found in white bread, rice, pasta and baked goods, cause blood sugar levels to rise rapidly, which can cause all kinds of health problems from weight gain to high blood pressure. Replace these foods with whole grains.
- Saturated fat that's found in meat, poultry skin, whole milk products and some oils is linked to high cholesterol, heart disease and cancer. Better options are ground turkey or vegetable bean combos for burgers, skim or lower-fat dairy products, and olive oil instead of butter or palm oil.
- Trans fats or hydrogenated oils are added to many packaged foods and desserts. Trans fats are a man-made product with no nutritional value; they increase the risk for heart disease, stroke and cancer. The foods that contain trans fats are also likely to be high in sugar, white flour and saturated fat. Try nuts and fruit for snacks and treats.

These food dos and don'ts are common among many diets, not just the Mediterranean-style diet. The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension), low-carbohydrate or combination diets all suggest similar healthy eating habits.

### Need Help?

Making changes in diet and other deeply ingrained lifestyle habits can be challenging. KnovaSolutions can help you identify obstacles, set goals (baby steps are good) and map out a plan of action.

Maybe you've noticed your thinking isn't as quick or a parent is more forgetful. Or maybe you need help deciding what to do about more dramatic changes.

We'll help you problem-solve. Give us a call at **800/355-0885**, Monday-Friday, 8 am-8 pm, MT.

By eating the above foods and avoiding the following foods, you can help stabilize your cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and work towards healthier blood vessels—the foundation for boosting brain power. Foods to avoid:

- Added sugars or syrups like high-fructose corn syrup found in sodas, sweetened drinks, fruit beverages and sweet tea add hundreds of calories. The sugar causes blood sugar levels to spike and interferes with mood and sleep. Drink water (or flavored, but not sweetened, seltzer water), herb teas and coffee instead.