



Foods that help boost your brain



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There's growing evidence that healthy eating habits play a role in brain health by protecting against cognitive diseases, such as Alzheimer's and dementia, and by boosting regular brain activity like memory and concentration.

January is Alzheimer's Awareness month, and an estimated 290,000 Canadians over the age of 65 have the disease, according to the Alzheimer Society of Canada. While Alzheimer's disease is normally acquired later in life, more and more research is indicating that foods eaten on a daily basis can have a protective effect on maintaining overall brain health.

Vitamins, nutrients, food combinations and meal timing can all influence cognitive function and brain health, according to current research, which says the following foods and eating habits have been shown to boost brain health.

Foods that protect the brain

Omega-3 fatty acids: A diet rich in the omega-3 fatty acid docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) has been found to significantly reduce the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

In fact, a study published in the November 2006 issue of Archives of Neurology found that people with the highest levels of DHA in their blood were 47 per cent less likely to develop age-related cognitive diseases, compared to those people with lower levels of DHA.

The best food sources of DHA are omega-3 enriched eggs and seafood and fish, especially cold-water fish, such as mackerel, salmon and herring. A great way to enrich your diet with DHA is by eating a four- or five-ounce serving of fish two to three times a week.

Fruit and vegetable juices: Fruit and vegetable juices have also been found to protect against the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

Findings published in the September 2006 issue of the American Journal of Medicine found that a daily glass of juice is enough to make a difference. Study participants who drank fruit or vegetable juice a few times a week were 76 per cent less likely to develop the disease compared with individuals who drank less than one glass a week.

The protective effect is thought to be a result of polyphenol, a natural compound found in the skin and peel of fruits and vegetables. Rich sources of polyphenols include apple, grape and citrus juices.

Choose 100 per cent fruit or vegetable juice instead of "beverages," "cocktails" or "drinks," since products with those designations contain some juice with the balance being water and sugar.

Mediterranean diet: There is increasing evidence that a Mediterranean diet can significantly protect against Alzheimer's disease. A study published in the December 2006 issue of Archives of Neurology found that closely following a Mediterranean diet could lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease by up to 68 per cent, while even a moderate compliance to the diet was shown to have a protective effect.

A Mediterranean diet is rich in legumes, whole grains, fish, nuts, fruits, vegetables and olives. It contains little meat and dairy products; as a result it is low in saturated fat and high in monounsaturated fat and dietary fibre. Some studies have shown the Mediterranean diet can protect against a variety of diseases, including heart disease and some cancers.

Foods rich in vitamin B: In case you need another reason to eat your greens, research suggests that green, leafy vegetables can protect against age-related dementia.

A 2005 study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found eating foods rich in B vitamins could protect against age-related mental decline. These findings support a 2004 study by Harvard researchers that found that middle-aged women who ate green leafy vegetables, a rich source of B vitamins, preserved more cognitive abilities in their 70s, compared to women who did not eat the nutrient dense vegetables.

Rich sources of B vitamins include turnip greens, Swiss chard, spinach and collard greens. Try adding dark green leafy vegetables to your salad, or steaming the greens with a drizzle of lemon juice or balsamic vinegar.

Maintain a healthy body weight

While obesity is a known risk factor for a variety of diseases, new research from the Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia suggests dementia and Alzheimer's disease may be added to the list of diseases associated with a high body mass index (BMI). A BMI between 20 and 25 is considered healthy, a BMI over 25 is considered overweight, while a BMI over 30 is obese.

Maintaining a healthy body weight through a healthy diet and regular physical activity may lower your risk of age-related dementia as well as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

Meal timing

It seems it's not only the foods we eat that play a critical role in maintaining regular brain function, but also when we eat them.

Skipping meals and eating at irregular times can affect short-term brain function. Going for long periods between meals deprives the brain of the nutrients and energy it needs to function properly. As a result, brain functions such as memory, concentration and mood can be affected.

To optimize your brainpower, eat meals at regular times and have a healthy snack, such as a handful of nuts or piece of fruit, between meals to provide a steady supply of energy to the brain.

Importance of breakfast

There is increasing evidence that breakfast may be the most important meal of the day for our brains. Studies have shown that when students are given a healthy breakfast, it has a positive effect on cognitive function related to memory, test grades, creative ideas and school attendance.

Breakfast kick-starts our metabolism and brain function at the start of the day. Eat a breakfast to fuel brainpower by choosing foods that are high in fibre and are nutrient dense, such as whole grains and fruits.

The bottom line

Healthy eating and staying active are encouraged by health experts to help protect the body against heart disease, cancer and diabetes, but these precautions can also protect and improve brain health. Incorporating brain-healthy foods into your diet can boost brain function in the short term by promoting memory and concentration and protect against age-related cognitive diseases in the long term.

And don't forget: Healthy eating habits are most effective for keeping the brain sharp when combined with regular physical and mental activity.

Referenced: Michelle Gelok, January 24, 2007 (cbc.ca)