

Feed Your Brain!


By Desiree Nielsen RD, the Choices Dietitian

“You are what you eat” isn’t just an old wives’ tale—it’s true! Our digestive system breaks down food into its individual components, which are then reassembled into our muscles, bones and skin. The brain is no exception: formed from the food we choose, our brain’s composition contributes to its own health and longevity. Research into the effect of nutrition on our brain development and mental health is a relatively new area, but key messages are emerging to paint a picture of what brain food really is. Sorry folks, Smarties® don’t make the cut...here’s what does.

Fat Heads Our brains are approximately 60% fat; 20% of that fat is either omega 3 or 6 fatty acids. Modern diets contain few omega 3 fatty acids, which can affect our brain health. In fact, fatty acid changes in the brain have been linked to a host of conditions including depression, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s disease. Consuming large quantities of saturated fats also impacts our brain, making its tissues less flexible and fluid. To support brain health, avoid saturated fats when possible and improve your diet by adding more omega 3 rich foods such as raw walnuts and seeds like pumpkin, hemp and flax; omega 3 eggs; cold water fish like salmon and herring. Another reason to love olives: myelin, a protective sheath that covers our nerve fibres, is made up of mostly of oleic acid, the main component of olive oil!

Flex Your Antioxidants Classic research on turmeric use and Alzheimer’s in India has evolved to include a wider look at the role of antioxidants and phytochemicals in memory. Although more research is needed to completely understand this connection, studies suggest that many phytochemicals—like curcumin in turmeric and flavonoids in blueberries—not only protect the brain’s neurons but also help stimulate its regeneration. In the meantime, we know that eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices is good for us so enjoy!

Get off the Rollercoaster Unstable blood sugars have been linked to many ailments including chronic inflammation, mood swings and in some cases, depression. In addition, research suggests that the same enzyme which breaks down the beta amyloid plaque associated with Alzheimer’s Disease has a stronger affinity for insulin. Translation? Unstable blood sugars could result in the brain less able to “clean” up plaques and increase risk of Alzheimer’s. Choose processed carbohydrates like crackers, cookies and commercial baked goods less often. Instead, reach for 100% whole grain breads, muffins and pastas alongside plenty of lean protein, fruits and vegetables at each meal to balance blood sugars.

Know Your ABDs A is for amino acids: the amino acid tryptophan is the building block for serotonin, the “feel good” hormone. Ensure that you get at least 20g of protein from meat, dairy or beans at each meal for a steady supply of tryptophan. Vitamin D appears to increase the brain’s receptivity to serotonin so 1,000IU of vitamin D3 a day is recommended. The B vitamins are critical for healthy nervous system function and low folate status in particular has been linked to depression; consume whole grains, beans, raw green veggies and orange juice for your daily dose of folate. 

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Nutrition Tip: Healthy Picnics with Healthy Choices

Now that summer is in full swing many of us will be off hiking, biking or enjoying the beaches and parks. No doubt we will bring along some tasty morsels to top off a day of fun in the sun. Skip the old fashioned (and less healthy) fare of hamburgers, hotdogs and potato salad. Summer is the time when we are surrounded by a vast selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. Try salads made with black beans, corn, tomatoes and a few spices. Broccoli slaw with shredded carrots and quinoa tossed with vinaigrette will, hands down, beat out pasta salad. Barbeque Portobello mushrooms, peppers, zucchini and onions for a tasty side dish or exotic veggie burger. Top with some salsa or hummus and you are good to go. For the carnivore, salmon steak, chicken breast or shrimp kebabs are fabulous. Snacks are easy: have cut-up fruits or vegetables, whole grain crackers or low-fat yogurt. Even try white bean and artichoke dip and season as you like with fresh herbs. Top it all off with cool lemonade and a homemade granola bar—then let the games begin!

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