

Brain Health – Top Tips

Eat a ‘Mediterranean’ style diet - loaded with plentiful vegetables, healthy fats, fruits, whole grains and legumes. This life-long way of eating is rich in antioxidants, minerals, beneficial fats, and fibre for gut and brain health. Key foods to include:

- Oily fish (at least 2 portions per week)
- Healthy fats daily (avocado, extra virgin olive oil, chia seeds, flaxseeds, walnuts)
- Abundant vegetables (all types, especially dark green and leafy)
- Fruit (especially lower-sugar types, such as apples, pears, berries)
- Wholegrains including oats, quinoa and buckwheat (at most meals)
- Beans and Lentils (further sources of gut-friendly fibre)
- Eggs (most people can have around 5 a week)
- Bell peppers and other rich sources of vitamin C
- Fermented foods such as kefir, kombucha, kimchi (if liked), or live yoghurt
- Turmeric (use in cooking to aid absorption of anti-inflammatory compounds)
- Pumpkin and sesame seeds (sprinkle over stir-fries, salads, or porridge)
- Moderate amounts of quality meat, cheese and other dairy products

Enjoy protein with every meal and snack, and avoid sugar and refined carbohydrates, to limit insulin ‘highs’- too much sugar has a very negative affect on the brain and cognitive ability. Protein with every meal and snack is satisfying, and lowers the insulin response.

Feed your gut bacteria with fibre - the gut communicates directly with the brain and a high fibre diet is linked to a lower risk of dementia. Aim for 5-9 portions of fibre-rich vegetables and fruits per day, and use wholegrains such as oats, rye, wholewheat, quinoa.

Avoid hydrogenated oils (damaging trans fats) – found in refined vegetable oils (such as sunflower and rapeseed oil), margarine, ready-made baked products, microwave popcorn, fried foods, coffee creamers, crisps and crackers. Trans fats are linked to reduced memory and cognitive decline. Manufacturers are currently not required to label them in products.

Avoid artificial sweeteners such as aspartame and saccharin - these substances disrupt gut bacteria, and repeated intake has been linked to behavioural and cognitive issues in some studies.

Take care with alcohol - highly inflammatory and, in large amounts, can damage nerve cells making it difficult for brain communication.

Intake of salt may also affect brain function - sedentary adults with high-salt, ‘Western’ style diets may be more susceptible to cognitive decline than those who consume less salt.

Get at least 150 minutes of exercise each week. Be active on most days to improve oxygen transport and communication between brain cells. Walking is a good start.

Practice memory techniques (such as tricks to remember names, numbers and passwords). Remember the Forgetting Curve!

Engage in stimulating and social activities – quizzes, puzzles, games, U3A interest groups and events are great!

Want to take it further? Use an Online Cognitive Function Test, such as <https://foodforthebrain.org/> and follow the suggestions.

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This information is for education only and does not provide individual advice. If you have any concerns about your health, you should consult a medical practitioner. Do not begin a new programme of exercise without consulting your GP to check it is safe to do so.