

Eat Smart for a Healthier Brain

Add these 'superfoods' to your daily diet, and you will increase your odds of maintaining a healthy brain for the rest of your life.

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WebMD Archive

There's no denying that as we age chronologically, our body ages right along with us. But research is showing that you can increase your chances of maintaining a healthy brain well into your old age if you add these "smart" foods to your daily eating regimen.

Blueberries. "Brainberries" is what Steven Pratt, MD, author of *Superfoods Rx: Fourteen Foods Proven to Change Your Life*, calls these tasty fruits. Pratt, who is also on staff at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., says that in animal studies researchers have found that blueberries help protect the brain from oxidative stress and may reduce the effects of age-related conditions such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia. Studies have also shown that diets rich in blueberries significantly improved both the learning capacity and motor skills of aging rats, making them mentally equivalent to much younger rats. Ann Kulze, MD, author of *Dr. Ann's 10-Step Diet: A Simple Plan for Permanent Weight Loss & Lifelong Vitality*, recommends adding at least 1 cup of blueberries a day in any form -- fresh, frozen, or freeze-dried.

Wild salmon. Deep-water fish, such as salmon, are rich in omega-3 essential fatty acids, which are essential for brain function, says Kulze. Both she and Pratt recommend wild salmon for its "cleanliness" and the fact that it is in plentiful supply. Omega-3s also contain anti-inflammatory substances. Other oily fish that provide the benefits of omega-3s are sardines and herring, says Kulze; she recommends a 4-ounce serving, two to three times a week.

Nuts and seeds. Nuts and seeds are good sources of vitamin E, says Pratt, explaining that higher levels of vitamin E correspond with less cognitive decline as you get older. Add an ounce a day of walnuts, hazelnuts, Brazil nuts, filberts, almonds, cashews, peanuts, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, flax seed, and unhydrogenated nut butters such as peanut butter, almond butter, and tahini. Raw or roasted doesn't matter, although if you're on a sodium-restricted diet, buy unsalted nuts.

Avocados. Avocados are almost as good as blueberries in promoting brain health, says Pratt. "I don't think the avocado gets its due," agrees Kulze. True, the avocado is a fatty fruit, but, says Kulze, it's a monounsaturated fat, which contributes to healthy blood flow. "And healthy blood flow means a healthy brain," she says. Avocados also lower blood pressure, says Pratt, and as hypertension is a risk factor for the decline in cognitive abilities, a lower blood pressure should promote brain health. Avocados are high in calories, however, so Kulze suggests adding just 1/4 to 1/2 of an avocado to one daily meal as a side dish.

Whole grains. Whole grains, such as oatmeal, whole-grain breads, and brown rice can reduce the risk for heart disease. "Every organ in the body is dependent on blood flow," says Pratt. "If you promote cardiovascular health, you're promoting good flow to the organ system, which includes the brain." While wheat germ is not technically a whole grain, it also goes on Kulze's "superfoods" list because in addition to fiber, it has vitamin E and some omega-3s. Kulze suggests 1/2 cup of whole-grain cereal, 1 slice of bread two-three times day, or 2 tablespoons of wheat germ a day.

Beans. Beans are "under-recognized" and "economical," says Kulze. They also stabilize glucose (blood sugar) levels. The brain is dependent on glucose for fuel, Kulze explains, and since it can't store the

glucose, it relies on a steady stream of energy -- which beans can provide. Any beans will do, says Kulze, but she is especially partial to lentils and black beans and recommends 1/2 cup every day.

Pomegranate juice. Pomegranate juice (you can eat the fruit itself but with its many tiny seeds, it's not nearly as convenient) offers potent antioxidant benefits, says Kulze, which protect the brain from the damage of free radicals. "Probably no part of the body is more sensitive to the damage from free radicals as the brain," says board-certified neurologist David Perlmutter, MD, author of *The Better Brain Book*. Citrus fruits and colorful vegetables are also high on Perlmutter's list of "brainy" foods because of their antioxidant properties -- "the more colorful the better," he says. Because pomegranate juice has added sugar (to counteract its natural tartness), you don't want to go overboard, says Kulze; she recommends approximately 2 ounces a day, diluted with spring water or seltzer.

Freshly brewed tea. Two to three cups a day of freshly brewed tea -- hot or iced -- contains a modest amount of caffeine which, when used "judiciously," says Kulze -- can boost brain power by enhancing memory, focus, and mood. Tea also has potent antioxidants, especially the class known as catechines, which promotes healthy blood flow. Bottled or powdered teas don't do the trick, however, says Kulze. "It has to be freshly brewed." Tea bags do count, however.

Dark chocolate. Let's end with the good stuff. Dark chocolate has powerful antioxidant properties, contains several natural stimulants, including caffeine, which enhance focus and concentration, and stimulates the production of endorphins, which helps improve mood. One-half ounce to 1 ounce a day will provide all the benefits you need, says Kulze. This is one "superfood" where more is not better. "You have to do this one in moderation," says Kulze.

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