

Nourishing Your Brain

We all have walked into a room and forgotten why we went in there. Most of us misplace our keys, purse, wallet or phone at some point. Forgetting things once in a while is normal. When we forget how to make a phone call or find our way home can be more serious.

As we age, the signals in our brain slow. A study showed that cognitive decline can begin as early as our 20s. These skills include the ability to make rapid comparisons, remember related information. However not all cognitive skills decline. Performance tests of vocabulary or general knowledge consistently increases until at least age 60 or older. We can gain knowledge, but our brain's ability to make connections slows.

When our body uses oxygen, the byproducts can cause oxidative damage to our cells, including the brain cells. Our cells can be damaged by pollution, smoking ultraviolet light and inflammation. Oxidative damage may also contribute to heart disease, diabetes and cancer. We may be able to reduce the amount of damage by consuming foods rich in antioxidants. Antioxidants work to remove harmful molecules from our body and protect our cells.

Foods that are rich in antioxidants include: dark chocolate, kidney beans, soybeans, dried plums, blueberries and red apples. Although dark chocolate is the highest, you only need about 1 ounce a day to provide antioxidants to nourish your brain.

There are several vitamins and nutrients that act as antioxidants and can contribute to brain health.

Vitamin C is one of them found in citrus fruits, broccoli, brussels sprouts, strawberries and cantaloupe.

Vitamin E is another oxidant vitamin and is typically found in healthy fats. Vegetable oils such as corn, canola, sunflower, and olive oil contains Vitamin E. Also some of the breakfast cereals are fortified with vitamin E and generally contain about 40 percent of your daily recommendations.

Low levels of B vitamins especially Vitamin B12 and folate have been linked to cognitive decline. These include Vitamin B12 rich foods: meat, fish, poultry, milk eggs and fortified cereals. Folate is found in leafy green vegetables, fruits and dry beans, orange juice and strawberries. Enjoy foods rich in these nutrients at least three to four times a week.

Foods high in Beta carotene such as sweet potatoes, carrots, kale, spinach, winter squash, cilantro and fresh thyme can nourish your brain. Beta-carotene is a precursor to Vitamin A and it has antioxidant benefits.

Enjoy more blueberries. A study found that mice fed blueberries reversed age-related declines in cognitive function. Mice fed blueberries also had improved balance and coordination. Try eating a ½ cup of blueberries as part of your daily food intake.

Selenium is a mineral found in several foods such as seafood, mushrooms, egg yolks, poultry meats, nuts, garlic, broccoli and onions. Selenium content is directly related to the soil in which they are grown.

Omega 3 Fatty acids are essential fatty acids they aren't produced in the body, so we need to eat them. One type of omega-3 is called DHA and is used by the brain and central nervous system for cognitive function and mood control. In healthy young adults, DHA can improve higher brain functions. A deficiency in DHA is linked to an increased risk of developing dementia. Omega 3 can be found in seafood, vegetable oils and nuts.

Eating heart healthy can be important for a healthy brain. Many of the risk factors that are related to memory impairment are the same risks for cardiovascular disease, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, sedentary lifestyle and obesity. Following a heart healthy eating plan can help decrease these risk factors and improve brain health. This includes decreasing saturated fats and Trans fats that can cause buildup in the arteries. Increasing consumption of whole grains, fiber, fruits and vegetables are also important. Foods that decrease blood flow decrease the nutrients and oxygen that are supplied to the brain.

In addition to healthy eating to improve your memory, staying active is important. Do brain exercises that including hobbies, playing games, doing crossword puzzles, sewing, playing a musical instrument or learning a foreign language.

Exercising regularly is also important for helping to improve blood flow to the brain. Doing at least 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week can help. Although all exercises are good, dancing has been found to be the best physical activity for brain health. Try learning new dances or moves to challenge your brain. Also varying your physical activity routine can cause your brain to form new connections, so try walking a different route each time you walk.

Do you want learn more about how to improve your memory. Master Your Memory workshops are taking place at the Parker County Extension office, February 1, 6 and 8. For more information call 817-598-6168.

Sources: North Dakota State University Extension, ChooseMyPlate.gov and Alzheimer's Association.