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A Lifestyle Publication

# Brain Food

Experts weigh in on the top 10 foods for brain health

By Kathryn Bonn

Most of us know it in our guts, no pun intended. Some foods make us feel energetic, alert and help us think more clearly, while others leave us sluggish, slower and dumber. Food fads may come and go, but evidence is solidifying the scientific connection between a healthy diet and a healthy brain.

“Our brain is like our body’s motor,” says Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, a Hawaii-based physician and author who specializes in integrative medicine and treating fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue. “It consumes 10 times as much energy for its size as the rest of our body, so what we feed it determines whether it purrs like a Ferrari, or runs in fits and starts.”

Foods that fire up the body’s circulation also fuel the nervous system and brain and enhance mental clarity. “Blood flow to the brain is pivotal. Brain health is cardiovascular health,” says Sally Fisher, MD, Integrative Medicine and medical director at Sunrise Springs Spa Resort in Santa Fe, NM.

Studies show that certain foods slow the decline in cognitive abilities and keep us sharper as we age. But it’s not just about eating a handful of blueberries as a cheeseburger chaser. “A plant-rich diet, like the Mediterranean or DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diets, is key to brain health,” says Dr. Fisher, adding that we need an abundance of plant foods, eight to 10 servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

Everyone may not agree on all the best foods for brainpower, but there is consensus: Long term trials, including the Harvard University MUSE study, have shown that a whole-foods diet, heavy on fruits and vegetables and low on trans and saturated fats, reduces blood pressure, lowers rates of dementia and Alzheimer’s, and improves memory.

“One size doesn’t fit all,” points out Dr. Teitelbaum, so find your own sweet spots among these foods, and don’t eat beets if you hate beets. Spinach is fine if you’re not into kale. “Eat the food your body asks for, makes you feel good when you eat it, and leaves you feeling better.”



## Here are 10 foods to help fire up your synapses.

**1. Leafy greens: spinach, chard, kale, romaine, broccoli rabe** Pick your favorites and pile them on. A 2016 University of Illinois study concluded that lutein, a pigment found in dark-green vegetables, helps to preserve cognitive function and mental sharpness as the brain ages. And, according to Dr. Fisher, “There’s a huge overestimation of protein and how much we need. The World Health Organization says 10 percent of our calories should come from protein, we can get 25 percent of that from romaine lettuce, spinach and leafy greens.”

**2. Berries** Multiple studies have shown the benefits of berries, particularly blueberries and strawberries, for cardiovascular and brainpower benefits. Harvard researchers studied a group of nurses long term and found that berries reduced memory decline in older women by two and a half years. Flavonoids, found in berries, have an anti-inflammatory effect that aids brain function.

But don’t pick out the blueberries from the fruit bowl, says Dr. Fisher. “We need an array of plant foods for good health,” she says. Dementia and other brain disorders are fed by inflammation, “and plant foods decrease inflammation and improve gut health,” she says.

**3. Nuts and seeds**, especially almonds and walnuts, get almost universal thumbs ups for their high levels of healthy fats and vitamin E, which have shown to help cognitive decline as we age. Even though almonds get a lot of praise, don’t single out one nut: If you prefer walnuts, don’t force yourself to eat almonds.



**4. Herbs and spices** Dr. Fisher recommends plenty of fresh herbs like rosemary, and spices including curry and saffron, shown to have anti-inflammatory and cognition-boosting qualities. “Spices are whole foods,” she says, “and they have quite a few beneficial components,” including their antioxidant effect, which reduces inflammation in the body and helps brain health, too. Those benefits are found in many plants, herbs and spices, and in abundance in spices.

**5. Turmeric** This spice merits special mention, since its active compound, curcumin, may help improve memory in people with Alzheimer’s. It boosts serotonin and dopamine, anti-inflammatory benefits and is a powerful antioxidant. “People in India have a 70 percent lower risk of Alzheimer’s,” says Dr. Teitelbaum, “and this has been traced back to the curcumin.”

**6. Oily fish:** salmon, trout, mackerel, herring and sardines. The body needs fatty acids (EFAs) and some of the most effective for the brain, Omega-3 fats, occur naturally in oily fish. Omega-3s are widely considered a positive for brain health—minus the negative effects of mercury, pcbs or other substances found in some fish—so make sure you buy fish that is organic or wild-caught.

**7. Fermented, probiotic foods:** kimchi, sauerkraut, yogurt, kefir. Probiotics have been shown to be good for our gut health. Yogurt and kefir contain antibacterials, and folate, or folic acid, vitamin B9. Sauerkraut and other fermented foods also contain choline, a chemical some say is essential for transmission of nerve impulses to the brain and throughout the central nervous system.



## Exercise & Supplements

**BRAWN BOOSTS BRAINS** Exercise improves brain health and slows the decline in memory and thinking as we age, according to the MUSE and Wake Forest University studies.

A recent study of twins conducted at King's College London studied 324 middle-aged female twins, testing their memory, thinking and fitness levels, and, 10 years later, measuring again. On average, a muscularly powerful twin performed about 18 percent better on memory and other cognitive tests than the physically weaker sister. If one identical twin had sturdier legs than the other at the start of the study, she now displayed significantly more brain volume than her sister when their brains were scanned. Fitter legs were strongly linked to fitter brains!

**SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTS** Many of us have trouble getting enough nutrients from whole foods alone. Supplement-wise, here are some good options to try:

\* **Natrol Cognium** contains silk protein, which may increase acetylcholine production and has been shown in studies to support brain health and slow the onset of Alzheimer's.

\* **Juice Plus** offers concentrated veggie and fruit capsules and whole foods based protein shake mixes.

\* **Vectomega** is an Omega-3 supplement, with vegan versions including Ovega-3.

\* **Energy Revitalization** System vitamin powder includes choline and other nutrients designed to optimize brain function, in addition to B vitamins, magnesium and amino acids.

\* **Natrol 5-HTP** boosts serotonin, another important neurotransmitter that regulates mood in the brain.

Check with your doctor to find out what is best for you.

**8. Beets** A recent Wake Forest University study shows that beets increase flow of oxygen to the brain and slow dementia. Drinking beetroot juice before working out made the brains of older adults perform more efficiently, like younger brains. Natural nitrates in beets turn into nitric oxide and improve blood flow to the brain. According to Dr. Fisher, "These plants contain beneficial active plant compounds, including AHAs (the natural sugars in fruits and veggies), which help with inflammation and blood flow."

**9. Eggs** Opinions differ on the health benefits of eggs, but choline is found in abundance in eggs, and studies have shown choline can help with memory among perimenopausal and menopausal women. "When a woman does not have enough estrogen she is more likely to develop memory problems when she doesn't get enough choline," says Dr. Teitelbaum, who heralds eggs as a key food to fuel our brain's needs.

**10. Coffee, tea, chocolate** Caffeine, in moderation, can enhance our mood and sharpen our focus and concentration, primarily by turning off adenosine, the neurotransmitter that says "nighty night" to the brain, according to Dr. Teitelbaum. The substances known as phenols in coffee and chocolate have antioxidants and flavonoids similar to berries and they have been shown to lower heart attack risk. When it comes to one-half to one ounce of chocolate a day, tea or coffee in moderation (one to two cups a day), he reminds us again to follow our bodies when we decide what to eat for our brains: "Listen to your brain. What does your body really want?" Chances are that's also what it, and your brain, need.

