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Snack on "brain food"

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You likely have uttered the phrases "Where did I leave my keys?" or "I just forgot what I was going to say" at some point in your life. Maybe you're tired or stressed — or maybe there's an eating connection. Your brain might be trying to tell you something.

The brain needs fuel just like the rest of your body. Sugar is your brain's preferred fuel source — not table sugar, but glucose, which your body metabolizes from the sugars and carbohydrates you eat. Since the brain cannot store glucose, it needs a continuous source of fuel from foods.

This glucose comes from regular meals, with carbohydrates — vegetables, fruits, legumes and grain foods — as the best fuel source. Beyond that, adequate amounts of several B vitamins, vitamins C and E, iron and zinc are essential for normal brain function.

Recipe for fueling your brain

- Power up with produce:

Foods such as blueberries, strawberries and prunes show a positive benefit to short-term memory. It's easy to include these nutritional brain boosters in your diet. Mix fruit into cereal, yogurt or pancake batter.

- Skip the urge to skip meals:

You need to refresh your glucose supply, especially in the morning. Jumpstart your day with a nutritious breakfast. Also, studies have shown breakfast eaters are more successful at maintaining a healthy weight, possibly because eating breakfast can help reduce your hunger level throughout the day. In addition, include at least two healthy snacks in between meals — such as 1 cup of nonfat yogurt, 1/2 cup of high-fiber cereal or a handful of nuts — to provide an even flow of energy to your brain and body. Similar to eating too little, eating too much also can interfere with your ability to focus. Avoid eating heavy meals, which can make you feel lethargic.

- Supplements won't compensate for eating poorly:

A lousy diet with supplements still is a lousy diet. No amount of vitamin-popping will ensure good health unless you're eating a healthy, balanced diet. In whole foods, vitamins and minerals interact synergistically to fortify the body. The many benefits of consuming nutrients by eating fruits and vegetables can't be mimicked by downing isolated vitamins and minerals in pill form. The jury still is out on how ginseng, ginkgo or other herb combinations impact the brain. A daily multivitamin is OK, but check with your doctor before taking other supplements.

- Power up with protein:

Though it's hard to draw a connection with protein and brain function, one of the great benefits of protein is that it generally makes you feel satisfied longer than carbohydrates and fats. Eating a diet rich in lean and low-fat protein is good for weight loss and overall health. Think skinless poultry, fish, lean beef and soy.

- Add a daily dose of nuts and chocolate:

Nuts and seeds are good sources of the antioxidant vitamin E, which is associated with less cognitive decline as you age. Dark chocolate also has powerful antioxidant properties and contains natural stimulants such as caffeine that can enhance short-term focus and concentration. Enjoy up to an ounce a day of nuts and dark chocolate to provide all the benefits you need without excess calories, fat or sugar.

- Add avocados and whole grains to your diet:

Every organ in the body depends on blood flow, especially the heart and brain. Eating whole grains and fruits such as avocados can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and enhance blood flow, offering a simple, tasty way to fire up brain cells. Whole grains — such as oats, brown rice, quinoa, barley and whole wheat bread — also contribute dietary fiber and vitamin E, while avocados have fat. But it's a good-for-you, monounsaturated fat that contributes to healthy blood flow.

- Eat fatty fish (salmon, sardines and tuna) two times a week:

The idea that fish is "brain food" has been with us for many years, but new research shows that omega-3 fatty acids in fish and fish oil can help our brains stay healthy. These healthy fats have amazing brain power: higher dietary omega 3 fatty acids are linked to lower dementia and stroke risks, slower mental decline and can play a vital role in enhancing memory — especially as we get older.

BAKED SALMON DIJON

1 cup fat-free sour cream or nonfat Greek yogurt

3 tablespoons scallions, chopped

2 tablespoons Dijon mustard

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 teaspoons dried dill

1 1/2 pounds salmon fillet, cut in center

1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

Fat-free cooking spray, as needed

Whisk sour cream, scallions, mustard, lemon juice and dill in small bowl to blend. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Lightly oil baking sheet with cooking spray. Place salmon on prepared sheet. Sprinkle with garlic powder and pepper, then spread with sauce. Bake salmon until just opaque in center, about 20 minutes. Serving size: One 4-ounce piece. Makes 6 servings.

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