Food For Thought

The basis of all brain functions such as learning, memory, planning, organization, attention, reaction time, and emotions, involve tiny electrical impulses and chemical signals of your neurons.

Did you know that what you eat can have a great impact on the health and well-being of your hard working neurons? That subject is near and dear to the heart of Valarie Dancy, MD, PhD. In addition to being a registered dietitian, Dancy is a doctoral student in the Interdisciplinary Program in Neuroscience at Georgetown University.

Dancy says your diet provides the building blocks for the neuron's ability to communicate with its neighbors. A healthy, balanced diet can help you optimize the functioning of your neurons and your brain.

As we start a new academic year, Dancy offers some food for thought with 10 brain-boosting tips. She says those who have a lot more room for improvement will see the most benefit.

1. Eat more non-fried seafood. Sixty percent of the brain is made up of fat, so eating specialized fats in the brain. The example of omega-3 is more than enough fish, it better the balance between the right kinds of fats that makes the difference for brain function. To ensure you get enough of omega-3 fats in your diet, aim for a variety of non-fried fish and seafood (including salmon, tuna, mackerel, and sardines) and plant-based sources (including ground flaxseed, walnuts, and canola oil). This 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends about eight ounces of non-fried seafood per week.

2. Eat low-fat dairy and occasional lean meats. The many fats of the brain require energy and lots of regular clean up and cell repair. Vitamin B12 is one important factor that helps the brain use energy and perform repairs. B12 is found naturally in animal foods including milk and eggs. Many products, particularly cereal and non-cereal fortified with it. Just under a microgram (0.001 mg) meets your daily requirements, an amount that’s easily covered by two glasses of low-fat milk.

3. Eat leafy greens. Your brain is only two percent of your body weight but it receives up to 20 percent of your blood supply. Eat a diet that keeps your blood vessels in shape to ensure your brain gets the blood supply it needs. Limit your intake of processed foods, which are generally very high in salt content. When choosing fats, choose liquid oils (unsaturated) over solid (saturated) fats. Avoid products with trans fats and the words “partially hydrogenated” in the ingredients list.

4. Focus on slow foods. Your brain needs energy to do work around the clock. To deliver a steady supply to your brain, by the following: slow down, increase your fluid intake, and choose whole grain cereals with the refined, processed ones. Aim for at least 50% whole foods at each meal to keep energy delivery to the brain more even and space your meals evenly across the day.

5. Eat breakfast daily. Reduce that morning “fog” replace non-empty (brain) fuel reserves by eating a mixed meal breakfast within an hour or two after waking, not used to breakfast? Start small and increase foods gradually.

6. Ferment your drink. Your brain relies on your blood pressure and the blood's contents to be in a balance. Aim to consume enough of whole green drinks and foods to keep electrolytes and blood volume in balance. Drink water when you're thirsty, coffee (in moderation) or choice foods with high water content like fruits and vegetables.

7. Get some sunshine vitamin. Immunity is just as important for your brain as it is for the rest of your body. Vitamin D can help the function of immune cells in your brain. Aim for an even vitamin D level across seasons (600 IU of vitamin D3 per day) from fatty fish, eggs and fortified milk.

8. Vary your vegetables and fruits. Normal brain activity produces wear and tear that needs repair. Antioxidants, like those found in fruits, vegetables, help repair damage to cells. Eat a variety of colors to take in the most types of antioxidants. Aim for two cups of fruit, two cups of vegetables daily on a 2000 calorie diet, adjust up or down slightly based on your calorie needs.

9. Exercise more. Not only can exercise improve blood flow to your brain, but it can also improve many aspects of brain function including memory. Aim for 150 minutes per week of moderate activity (brisk walking, swimming, lawn mowing) or 75 minutes of vigorous activity (running, jogging) spread out over at least three days.

10. Maintain a healthy weight. Eat a well-balanced diet and exercise, avoiding excess weight and aiming for a Body Mass Index between 18.5 and 24.5 kg/m2 can help your brain function at its best.

In addition to the above tips, Dancy suggests prediluting portion control, especially with higher calories foods, especially when it comes to desert, what is good for the body, and that goes for other lifestyle factors like this. Dancy says. Remember that the goal is a healthy lifestyle; diet is a big part of lifestyle but not all of it. Adding other brain boosters to your lifestyle like getting enough sleep, minimizing stress, staying socially active, and challenging yourself mentally can maximize your benefits.

Reviewed by: Thomas B. Sherman, PhD, associate professor of pharmacy.

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Please note that Dancy’s tips are tailored for a generally healthy adult. Nutrition needs vary by the age and stage in life, and by medical condition. For specific dietary needs, please consult a registered dietitian or physician.

For more information, check out the USDA’s My Plate, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and DC Metro Area Dietetics Association to find a local Registered Dietitian and Brand X Images to learn more about the basics.

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