

Brain Foods

improving brain function & cutting stroke risk



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Did you know that your level of risk for a stroke is related to your diet? The three main risk factors for stroke you can avoid through a healthy diet are high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure and obesity or overweight. People who enjoy eating fruits and vegetables, nuts, whole grains, fish and unsaturated fatty oils are less likely to have ischemic stroke than those who consume a diet rich in fatty meat and full cream dairy foods. Ischemic strokes occur as a result of an obstruction within a blood vessel supplying blood to the brain. The underlying condition for this type of obstruction is the development of fatty deposits lining the vessel walls.

Foods rich in vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytonutrients will protect our brain cells from oxidation and free radical damage. Complex carbohydrates, in starchy foods like whole grain breads, pasta and rice releases energy slowly that helps brain to function in a stable way. For improved concentration and mental performance whole grains are better than refined foods.

Folate, along with other B vitamins, helps to break down homocysteine, an amino acid that damages the artery walls (Damages to arteries lead to stroke and heart disease). Antioxidants prevent the chain reaction of free radicals that damage the cells. Vitamin E is a powerful antioxidant just like Vitamins C and A.

Here are some foods that will help you improve brain function as well as reduce the risk of stroke:



Vegetables

Spinach, mustard greens, parsley, avocado, olives and broccoli are good sources of Vitamin E. Spinach and broccoli are also rich in folate and Swiss chard is high in both Vitamin E and Vitamin C, a powerful antioxidant. Beet is an excellent root vegetable rich in nitrates that increase blood flow to the brain.

Fibre keeps our brain function at its best. Our brain operates on sugar. But the sugar must be delivered in a steady stream and in the right amount. When blood is flooded with sugar, our brain gets overwhelmed. Fibrous food helps to gradually release the sugar in our blood.

Dark green leafy vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds, peas and beans are rich in fibre and are good sources of magnesium which protects us from age-related memory loss.



Fruits

Papaya and mango are good sources of Vitamin A. Citrus fruits, kiwi, mango and strawberries are rich in Vitamin C. Pineapple is another fruit rich in vitamin C and contains bromelain, an enzyme with natural anti-inflammatory elements. Strawberries are rich in folate.

Free radicals in the bloodstream will strike and sabotage our cells. Prolonged exposure to free radicals will reduce the flexibility and harden the arteries which will eventually elevate blood pressure.

Furthermore, these free radicals will damage the brain cells and impede the message transmission. It is quite clear that free radicals will fast forward our ageing process and if we do not tackle this early in life, we are likely to experience age-related memory loss, skin wrinkles, stiff joints and hardening of arteries.

Fortunately, we have plenty of foods loaded with powerful antioxidants, available in the market. These strong antioxidants will interact with free radicals. Polyphenols, namely anthocyanins, found in berries and dark pigmented fruits and vegetables help slow cognitive decline through their powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

Chocolate

Dark chocolate, as several studies have shown, is associated with a positive influence on mood. It also scavenges free radicals through catechin, a group of plant polyphenols.

The higher the amount of trans fats, saturated fats, and refined carbohydrates in your diet, the higher the risk of ischemic stroke. Excess salt intake also increases the blood pressure and, therefore, stroke risk.

Regular physical activity and healthy foods help reduce inflammation, oxidative stress and other vascular risk factors such as high blood pressure, all of which have a role in increasing the risk for brain and heart diseases

Fish

Our human brain is 60% fat. Trans fat is bad for the brain because it will interrupt the functions of essential fatty acids. Essential fatty acids, linolenic and alpha-linolenic acid must be obtained from food because they cannot be synthesised in the body. These fats are used to produce omega-3 (EPA and DHA) and omega-6 fatty acids, vital for the normal functioning of cells in the body.

Omega 3, which promotes a healthy heart, also helps our brain. DHA, one of the omega fatty acids, is the primary structural fatty acid of the brain that promotes communication between cells and message transmission.

Omega-3 fatty acids in fish like salmon, herring, tuna sardines, can help fend off numerous brain diseases. Processed foods and commercial chocolates, margarines, shortening, baked goods are high in trans-fat. Examine food labels carefully before purchasing the products.

Water

Be sure to drink water at regular intervals. Our mental energy is decreased even if we are only slightly dehydrated. Dehydration causes fatigue and impairs memory.

Drinking at least two litres of water every day will keep our body and brain hydrated. Drinking tea with low-calories will improve your arteries. The polyphenols in tea exhibit antioxidant properties. Consider sipping different types of teas such as English tea, green tea and peppermint tea. Both black and green tea leaves provide different beneficial compounds.

Antioxidant-rich foods

Vitamin C

Citrus fruits, berries (strawberries, blueberries, cranberries), dragon fruit, dark green vegetables, cabbage, broccoli, bell peppers.

Vitamin A

Carrot, squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, peaches, mangoes, papaya, apricots, cantaloupe.

Vitamin E

Nuts, seeds, wheat germ, whole grains, vegetable oil, fish, green leafy vegetables.

Selenium

Eggs, chicken, red meat, shell fish, whole grains, mushroom.

Lycopene

Tomatoes, guava, grapefruit, watermelon, guava.

Tryptophan & Tyrosine

Neurotransmitters are the messengers that carry brain signals. Tryptophan and tyrosine few among the components of neurotransmitter. Tryptophan is an anxiety calmer and sleep promoter and Tyrosine is a metabolism booster and anti-depressant.

Seafood, lean meat, eggs, soy, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds and dairy products are good sources of neurotransmitter-building foods.

Grass-feed lean red meat is also rich in vitamin B-12, which is vital for brain function, and iron that helps transport oxygen throughout the body and to the brain.

References

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