

Feed your brain and live better

Melissa Carr, 24 hours

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Walnuts look a bit like brains, and are good for the brain. (FOTOLIA)

Whether studying for mid-terms, going to work, or winding down for the day, your brain is necessary for everything you do.

At work 24/7, the brain is a glutton for energy. Though it makes up only about 2% of total body weight, it consumes 20% of our resting metabolic rate — the total amount of energy expended with no activity.

The right foods can help feed your brain. Caffeine is a stimulant that can help increase focus and concentration, but too much can lead to jitters. A less stimulating alternative is green tea. It contains some caffeine, but also a substance called L-theanine, an amino acid that may improve cognition, reduce mental and physical stress, and boost mood.

While glucose is the main energy source for the brain, too much sugar can actually impair brain function. A diet high in added sugar reduces the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor — a brain chemical necessary for forming new memories and learning. Low levels of BDNF have also been linked to depression and dementia. To satisfy your sweet tooth, consider small amounts of naturally sweet foods, such as sweet potato, yam, fruit, dates, and figs. Combining this with cinnamon may further protect the brain by helping your body better manage sugar, as well as increasing BDNF.

Prefer savoury over sweet? Rosemary has been used traditionally to strengthen memory and has been demonstrated to increase blood flow to the head, thus improving concentration. Cook it with fresh salmon to benefit from the essential fatty acids and their brain-boosting benefits.

Traditional Chinese medicine notices the appearance of foods and has long observed that walnuts look like brains. We now know that walnuts are also high in EFAs, so they — along with flax, chia, hemp, almonds and other nuts and seeds — are noted brain foods.

TCM herbs can also be prescribed for those noticing trouble with concentration, memory and focus. A recent review and analysis of Chinese herbal texts noted that some of the herbs most mentioned to treat forgetfulness were yuan zhi, fu shen, and chang pu. It's not coincidental that these herbs are also commonly used to calm the mind. Acupuncture also supports a calm mind, and, wait for it, needles can also help you be as sharp as they are.

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