

Genius Diet

Certain foods can help keep your brain as fit as your body. Read on to learn all you need to know about edible intelligence.

By Amy Paturel

What good is having the body of a twenty-something if your brain sputters like it's decades older? Cognitive diseases plague millions each year, and even if you're far from diagnosis, your memory, clarity, and general on-the-ball-ness can all head downhill as birthdays fly by. But you can stall your gray matter's descent—and it will be delicious. Here's what smart eats (yes, beyond salmon's omega-3's) can do, and where to find them.

AGE IN REVERSE

Beat Back Inflammation

As you age, brain cells can spurt inflammatory (and fast-spreading) chemicals. Inflammation is sometimes the body's normal response to injury, but chronic inflammation can kill off cells, potentially leading to dementia, Alzheimer's, and Parkinson's. But if you intervene before your neurons say sayonara, says Bickford, you may be able to preserve proper function. Curcumin, a compound used in Indian folk medicine for thousands of years, may reduce inflammation deep within brain tissue. (Researchers think the high levels of curcumin eaten in India, thanks to curry, account for the country's astonishingly low Alzheimer's rates.) "Nutrients called catechins can also guard cells against inflammation and enhance cognition," says brain researcher Majid Fotuhi, M.D., Ph.D., founder of NeurExpand, a neurology clinic in Lutherville, Maryland. No wonder research shows that people who sip tea—a catechin gold mine—beat others on memory tests. The compounds act like nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs to quell inflammation, but without the side effects (and with more flavor!).

Shield Brain Cells

Antioxidants can help your whole body beat the clock. These compounds combat rogue chemicals called free radicals, which are thought to attack and, over time, wear out cells—including brain cells. Antioxidants' most important job may be defending the mitochondria, the furnaces inside your cells that generate the energy you need to think (or move, or breathe), says Paula Bickford, Ph.D., a professor of neurosurgery and brain repair at the University of South Florida. Research links flavonoids, a type of antioxidant, to these protective powers: In a study published in *Neurology*, people who ate two-plus servings of flavonoid-rich foods per day boasted the mental focus of someone approximately five years younger. And according to recent French research, subjects who filled up on produce high in carotenoids, another antioxidant, saw less cognitive decline over 13 years.

Brain-Power Foods
Apples, onions, and citrus fruits (flavonoids); orange veggies such as pumpkin, sweet potatoes, and squash (carotenoids); leafy greens such as spinach, kale, arugula, and broccoli (both)

Brain-Power Foods
Yellow mustard, and Thai and Indian cuisines, particularly curry dishes (curcumin); green and black teas, plus blackberries, apricots, and strawberries (catechins)

Boost Blood Flow

↓
Your noggin needs a constant supply of nutrient-rich blood to stay sharp. Studies suggest an increased flow bolsters learning, memory, and reaction time, possibly by fostering growth in the hippocampus. The wonder compound resveratrol may amplify cranial blood supply by up to 30 percent, animal research shows, in part by keeping artery walls clear of obstructive plaques. And monounsaturated fats (i.e., “good fats”) help lower the levels of bad fats and cholesterol that can lurk in your bloodstream. A bonus: Studies show that monounsaturated fats lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol levels, and reduce the risk for heart attack and stroke.



Brain-Power Foods
Red wine and grape juice (resveratrol); avocados, nuts, and olive oil (monounsaturated fats)

Spark New Neurons

↓
Some nutrients spur the release of a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, says Fotuhi. “With more BDNF, we can not only stall the effects of aging but also rejuvenate the brain by making more neurons,” he says. Though researchers aren’t yet sure how the chain reaction works, their eyes are on a compound called choline, a building block of the critical neurotransmitter acetylcholine, which helps the brain relay messages. “It’s like a natural form of the Alzheimer’s drug Aricept, which inhibits the breakdown of those neurotransmitters,” says Jonny Bowden, Ph.D., author of *The 150 Healthiest Foods on Earth*. Another potential BDNF booster: bright plant pigments called anthocyanins. In a study, drinking blueberry juice, a first-rate source, enhanced participants’ memory over 12 weeks. Animal research also supports the promising link between anthocyanins and increased mental sharpness.



Brain-Power Foods
Egg yolks (nope, not the whites), followed by beef, chicken, and liver (choline); dark blue or purple fruits such as blackberries, blueberries, cherries, and plums (anthocyanins)



Supplements with Smarts

Many doctors recommend these all-star add-ons, which are often easier to get as supplements than in foods.

Spirulina: This blue-green algae may reverse age-induced decreases in brain function, lower the extent of damage during a stroke, and decrease oxidative stress and inflammation, according to animal research.

Alpha-Lipoic Acid: A slew of studies suggests alpha-lipoic acid safeguards mitochondria, delaying cognitive decline, while augmenting memory and learning.

DHA: The brain is made up of 60 percent fat, and DHA is the most abundant omega-3 fatty acid in the brain’s cell membranes. Studies show it helps reduce inflammation, increase blood flow to the brain, and regenerate new brain cells. ■