

Feeding your Brain

The Journal of Neuroepidemiology estimates that one of every four people in their 80's has some form of dementia and many more have what is known as 'mild cognitive impairment.' Because of these staggering statistics more focus is being placed on how to prevent or delay these disorders. Evidence is mounting that certain lifestyle changes can promote a healthier aging of your brain.

There are a wide range of claims connecting certain foods to a healthier brain but the evidence to support the claims is not concrete enough to make definitive recommendations. We can say with confidence though that regular physical activity that promotes a trimmer waist provides a great deal of 'brain insurance'. Research has shown that exercise, particularly aerobic exercise like walking, helped promote an increase in the volume of gray matter within the brain. Gray matter is brain tissue rich in nerve cells. Gray matter typically decreases in volume as we get older. Make sure your physical activity targets your belly too. If you can reduce that amount of fat around your midsection you can help reduce circulating insulin levels. High levels of insulin, like those found in type 2 diabetes, have been closely linked to dementia. Abdominal fat is also connected to numerous other health problems.

While many of the nutrient related benefits of brain aging require a little more research, evidence does point to caffeine as having benefit. Numerous studies have shown that dementia is less prevalent in coffee drinkers and there is also less of a decrease in memory as coffee drinkers age. The literature seems to suggest that 4 to 5 cups of coffee daily is tied to the greatest benefits although that may be a little too much for someone not used to that amount of caffeine. Individuals with heart arrhythmias or high blood pressure without medicine typically need to limit their caffeine. Check with your physician to see if caffeine is suitable for you.

Controlling blood pressure is also good protection against brain disorders. From a nutrition standpoint that gives you another reason to increase your intake of fruits and vegetables. The higher potassium levels typically found in these foods help promote better control of hypertension.

Bottom line, shop heavy in the produce section of your grocery store and don't be afraid to have a cup of coffee on the way to your exercise class.

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