

# Nourish your noggin

## Brain-boosting foods for thought



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By Leslie Pepper

HERE'S FOOD FOR thought: Your diet can influence not only your body's health, but your brain's health as well. The following six foods can help keep your head healthy.

**Berries.** Berries in the blue-red group—think blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, cranberries, elderberries and raspberries—are more than just a tasty treat. They also help keep you feeling sharp. Berries are chock-full of antioxidants, or, more specifically, anthocyanins. It's what gives berries their pigment, but, more than that, “anthocyanins prevent brain inflammation and improve blood flow to the brain,” says Marisa Sherry, a nutritionist in private practice in New York City. “This helps improve memory and prevent age-related degeneration.”

In fact, a study published in the *Annals of Neurology* found that women who ate at least one cup of blueberries and strawberries a week experienced a significant delay in mental decline (two and a half years!) compared with women who skipped the fruit.

**Eggs.** Eggs have gotten a bad rap in recent years. But eggs—more specifically, the yolks—are a rich source of choline, a chemical cousin to the B vitamins. Choline must be present in the body in order to create the brain chemical acetylcholine, which is thought to play a central role in learning and memory.

Eggs also have the highest-quality protein, says Sherry. “The protein in eggs helps fuel neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and norepinephrine, which helps the brain feel more alert,” she adds.

To keep your cholesterol intake in check, keep it to no more than one egg a day. Or eat lean meat, fish, poultry or soybeans, which are also good sources of choline.

**Oatmeal.** This complex carbohydrate



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Click here watch a video on the merits of omega-3s. (See page 11 for details.)

provides slow and steady fuel to the brain any time of day—not just in the morning. “Complex carbohydrates are converted to glucose, which is the main source of energy for our brains,” says Sherry. “Without glucose we have a hard time learning, remembering and focusing.”

And, because the body breaks down the carbs in oatmeal slowly, oatmeal supplies a steady stream of glucose that will keep mental muscles flexed for hours.

**Olive oil.** We've long known that olive oil is good for the heart. But new research shows the extra-virgin type may actually stave off Alzheimer's disease. Extra-virgin olive oil contains a type of natural phenolic compound called oleocanthal, which has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. And according to a study published in *ACS Chemical Neuroscience*, research on mice suggests that oleocanthal helps shuttle the abnormal Alzheimer's disease proteins out of the brain.

**Walnuts.** Grab a handful of walnuts if you're feeling forgetful. One study found they can help boost memory, concentration and information-processing speed. Researchers who looked at information from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that people who ate more walnuts performed better on a series of cognitive tests.

What's in walnuts that gives the brain a boost? Researchers point to many factors, including their high antioxidant content, the combination of vitamins and minerals, and the fact that they are the only nut that contains a significant source of alpha-linolenic acid, a plant-based omega-3 fatty acid with heart- and brain-health benefits.

**Wild salmon.** While fat may be bad for your waistline, certain types of fat are good

for your brain. “Your brain is composed of about 60 percent fat, so it needs fat to fuel itself and work properly,” says Cynthia Green, founder and director of the Memory Enhancement Program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City and author of *Brainpower Game Plan* (Rodale Books, 2009; not available at Costco).

Deep-water fatty fish, such as salmon, albacore tuna and anchovies, are rich in omega-3 essential fatty acids, one of those good fats. These include EPA and DHA, which bolster communication among brain cells and help regulate neurotransmitters responsible for mental focus. Data shows that, in healthy adults, a higher intake of dietary omega-3 fatty acids boosts the so-called “executive functions” (that's science speak for more focus, faster decision-making and sharper memory)—especially as we get older. [E]

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## More brain boosters

OTHER FOODS YOU might want to stock in the fridge and pantry to keep your gray matter happy include avocados, cinnamon, coffee, dark chocolate, chickpeas, green leafy vegetables, red wine, seeds, tomatoes and wheat germ.



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