

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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April 21, 2019

“Foods to Enhance Brain Power”

Over five million Americans have Alzheimer's disease (AD) or some other form of dementia and one in three seniors dies with (not necessarily from) Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia. Although you cannot buy a bottle of “brain food,” you can choose foods known to improve cognition and improve brain function. Many false claims have been rampant with articles pushing the notion that this can be achieved with coffee, cocoa, water, antioxidants, etc. But, please do not accept a flamboyant, so-called medical headline. Still, some experts believe food is a very effective and underutilized intervention in mental health. Get patients off of processed foods, off of white carbohydrates, and off of certain vegetable oils. Diet seems to be as important to psychiatry as it is to cardiology, endocrinology, and gastroenterology. Leafy greens such as kale, spinach, collards, and broccoli are rich in important nutrients—including vitamin K, lutein, folate, and beta carotene—that keep the brain healthy and are linked to slower cognitive decline. Fatty fish—like salmon, mackerel, herring, lake trout, sardines, and albacore tuna—are an abundant source of omega-3 fatty acids, particularly docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), a key to brain maintenance. Experts recommend eating fatty fish at least twice a week. Eating mushrooms may promote cognitive health and reduce neurodegeneration and researchers found that seniors who consumed more than two servings of mushrooms per week reduced their risk of mild cognitive impairment by 50%. Berries are a rich source of flavonoids, which have also been shown to inhibit the production of amyloid beta in Alzheimer's disease. Older women who ate two or more servings of strawberries and blueberries each week demonstrated a delay in cognitive decline by up to 2 and a half years. A cup of coffee or tea in the morning may also boost your brain function. Caffeine has a positive effect on long-term memory. Participants given caffeine performed better on tests of memory retention than participants on placebo. Eating walnuts appears to improve measures of cognitive function. Eating walnuts each day improves performance on tests of memory, concentration, and information-processing speed. Walnuts are the only nut that contains a significant amount of alpha-linolenic acid—a plant-based omega-3 fatty acid that has both cardiovascular and brain-boosting benefits. Eating walnuts is linked to overall brain health and reduced cognitive impairment, along with possible benefits of slowing or preventing Alzheimer's disease progression in mouse models.

In the America that I love, we should still be circumspect of miraculous promises of increasing brain function with diet alone. Diet should be combined with an all-around healthy life style. Avoid smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, excessive weight gains and a lack of physical activity. Good ole' common sense wins every time.

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