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### QUALITIES OF LIFE: HEALTH

## What you eat now may decide how your brain ages

By Drs. Kay Judge and Maxine Barish-Wreden, McClatchy/Tribune Newspapers

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Scientists are learning that there are many factors that affect our brain as we get older. Some changes are purely structural, and some changes affect brain functioning.


The physical changes in an aging brain include a loss of brain mass, a decrease in white matter, a decrease in the outer surface of the brain and a decrease in chemical messengers in the brain. This leads to a decrease in brain weight and brain volume. But these structural changes are not necessarily linked to cognitive decline. And contrary to popular belief, we do not lose neurons but continue to form neurons as we age.

Another interesting fact is that a decline in brain functioning was thought to be from degenerative changes in the brain called neurofibrillary tangles and senile plaques. But an autopsy study in the *Journal of Neurophysiology* looked at brains of elderly people who were fully functioning until death. Their brains surprisingly had the changes found in Alzheimer's victims, with a large number of plaques and tangles. But none of these patients had any symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

Scientists are investigating other causes for the deterioration of brain function, including the deposition of a protein called amyloid in brain tissue. This process is thought to be accelerated by inflammation in the body.

Research shows that the foods we eat probably play a role in decreasing inflammation in the body. Taking this into account, the brain-healthy diet includes:

- \* Five to 10 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. This includes apples and onions for their flavonoids, dark green leafy vegetables such as kale and spinach for their carotenes, cooked tomatoes for lycopene (another carotene) and blueberries for their antioxidants.
- \* Fish eaten at least twice weekly, or omega-fatty acids taken as a daily supplement.
- \* Olive oil for cooking.
- \* Black or green tea.



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\* Whole grains.

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\* Dark chocolate.

The brain-healthy diet limits or excludes red meat, excessive salt, trans-fats, saturated or animal fats, high glycemic foods and overly processed foods.

In addition to inflammation, studies have shown that stress and depression may contribute to decreased cognitive functioning. What can you learn from this information on maintaining an active brain?

Even though there are physical changes in the brain that occur with Alzheimer's disease, there is the unknown factor some people with these changes will get the disease and some will not. This is powerful information, as we do know that there are things we can do with our lifestyle to ward off cognitive decline.

Eat an anti-inflammatory diet, keep your body and brain active, deal with stress appropriately and don't smoke. Your brain may stay young forever.

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Drs. Kay Judge and Maxine Barish-Wreden are medical directors of Sutter Downtown Integrative Medicine program in Sacramento Calif.

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