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Nutrition for Brain Health: you are tomorrow what you eat today!

By Luciana Cramer, Educator and Care Specialist

Your longevity starts now. Some people postpone adopting health sustaining strategies until “when I get old” (whatever that means to you). Big mistake.

Research increasingly demonstrates that how you live your earlier years has direct consequences on your health as you approach your later years. This is particularly true for nutrition in relation to brain health.

Beginning in the womb, micronutrients and fat stores are important for brain development, influencing the risk of cognitive impairment and dementia in older age. Studies indicate fat-levels measured in young adulthood are directly related to cognitive decline in mid-life. Researchers have also found a direct correlation between waist circumference in mid-life and dementia in later life.

Body inflammatory responses are associated with numerous conditions, including cardiovascular disease and dementia. Studies indicate that high levels of inflammation over a lifetime, evidenced by high levels of interleukin-6, have a direct correlation with the onset of dementia. This is even more so in cases of vascular dementia. Existing anti-inflammatory drugs are inadequate to lower extended inflammation responses. The only way to reduce them is through dietary and stress-reducing habits.

Healthy dietary habits that support brain health should therefore begin early in life if you want to lower your risk of developing dementia. A healthy diet may also help slow the progression of natural cognitive aging that is believed to begin at mid-life.



Where do I start?

With so many different diets boasting to be the healthiest, it may be confusing to make the best choices. There is the Mediterranean diet, and the vegetarian diet. There are also the vegan, pescetarian, kangatarian, low-protein, high-protein, Haker's, Atkins, Dukan, low-carb, low-carbon, Okinawa, Paleolithic, gluten-free, Beverly Hills and macrobiotic diets, just to name a few.

But according to nutritionist Erin Van Valkenburgh RDN, CSG, there is no magic diet, there is no diet to prevent dementia, and there is no pill or single vitamin or mineral that can prevent or reverse Alzheimer's disease.

“The most important guidelines you can follow is to eat clean, nutrient-dense whole foods, be active for 30 minutes daily, and get adequate sleep,” says Van Valkenburgh, who specializes in Gerontological Nutrition. She recommends following these basic guidelines:

Eat a balanced real-food diet

A balanced real-food diet means eating foods as close to their natural state as possible,



Tips

Lifetime choices to reduce your risk of developing dementia:

Exercise every day

Dance

Laugh

Sleep more

Lower your stress levels

Learn a second language

Learn an activity you can do with your hands

Get a massage

Marry only for love

Enjoy your loved ones

Cultivate your friendships

Drink plenty of water

Avoid excess alcohol

Quit smoking

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unaltered and unrefined so that their essential nutrients remain intact. The goal is to eliminate foods that might be contributing to inflammation and poor health. A real-food diet generally consists per meal of:

Vegetables: 2-3 different and colorful vegetables. They should compose half of your plate.

Protein: 2 or 3 oz. (about the size of your hand). Lean meats, eggs, fish, or legumes.

Fat: 1-3 tablespoons of healthy fats, including olive oil, avocado, and coconut oil.

Fruits: 0-1 pieces or servings (a serving is ½ cup or the size of a baseball).

Breads/Cereals/Starches: 1 serving per meal. (a serving would be one slice, ½ cup, or a small potato).

Milk and Milk Products: 1 serving per meal (a serving would be 1 cup of fluid milk, ½ cup plain yogurt, 1 oz of hard or soft cheese).

Fluids: Water is the best choice, limit coffee and fruit juices to 1-2 servings per day.

Sweets: Dark chocolate has the most health benefits, limit sweets to 0-1 serving per day.

While the above guidelines are general, some people feel better if they limit or avoid breads and milk products. Each person is different and what works for some might not work for others.

An “elimination diet” can be used for 30 days to see if there are any “trigger foods.”

There is also a well-documented correlation between diets rich in antioxidants and lower levels of dementia. High antioxidant foods include dark-colored grapes, blue and red berries, nuts, green and orange veggies, green tea, whole grain, beans, and fish. It is not recommended that you limit your diet to just these foods. However, when exercising your choices, you may want to give them preference.

By all means avoid sugars, saturated fats and trans fats – which are common ingredients in most processed foods. These foods promote high inflammation levels, high cholesterol and hypertension, and are associated with high incidences of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and dementia.

Van Valkenburgh reminds us that a person with dementia, like everyone else, may have other health-related problems that should be considered. No single diet meets everyone’s needs. You should consult with your doctor or with a registered dietitian for an individualized diet plan.

The effects of unhealthy life practices are cumulative and get progressively more consequential over the years. Your nutritional decisions now will affect your health for the rest of your life. There is no such thing as “too soon” to get started. Make better choices today. Your healthy future-self will thank you.



Tools: Food Chart



Food	Amount per meal	Type
Veggies	Half of your plate	2-3 different colors
Protein	2-3 oz	Lean meats, eggs, fish, legumes
Fats	1-3 tablespoons	Olive oil, avocado, coconut oil
Fruits	1/2 cup	Any fruit (they are rich in oxidants!)
Milk and milk products	1 cup of fluid milk, ½ cup plain yogurt, 1 oz of hard or soft cheese	Favor low-fat milk and milk products
Breads/Cereals/Starches	1 slice, 1/2 cup or small potato	Avoid white breads and sweetened cereals
Sweets	0-1 servings per day	Favor dark chocolate