

Food as a Memory Enhancer Wendy Warner, MD, ABIHM

I imagine that most folks reading this article have, at some point, wondered why they can't seem to remember much anymore. Memory loss --or at least poor retrieval—is becoming a monumental issue in this country. Whether it is caused by Alzheimer's, senile dementia, poor circulation to the brain or simply stress, many of us wonder if we'll still be able to remember things years from now.

Memory is a complicated thing, but we'll focus on a few basics. First, the type and amount of fats that we eat make a big difference in how well our brains function. Nerve cells are wrapped in a fatty layer that insulates them and insures good conduction. Healthy fats like those found in olive oil, walnuts, hemp seeds and salmon form healthy, functioning insulation. They also contribute to healthier blood vessels so that the brain gets good oxygen and appropriate nutrients. Other sources of good fats are sardines, anchovies, avocados, and brazil nuts. Eggs from pastured chickens (but not the usual supermarket egg) contain high levels of omega 3 fatty acids. They also contain choline, an antiinflammatory chemical helpful in brain function.

Saturated fats and trans fats, however, lead to less healthy brain function. This is like having broken insulation on an electric cord---usually leads to some short circuiting. Avoiding processed foods containing trans fats (most boxed crackers and cookies) and minimizing beef, chicken, pork (especially bacon!) and dairy will help to keep this in check.

The **amount** of fat in the diet is also important, even if it's healthy fat. High fat diets lead to production of inflammation and free radicals. This free radical damage leads to death of brain cells. Most experts suggest that we limit the fat in our diets to 20-25%, which is significantly lower than what is typical in this country.

Free radical damage can also be avoided by eating a diet rich in antioxidants. This includes Vitamins C and E, the carotenoids and flavonoids found in highly colorful vegetables and fruits, and minerals like zinc and manganese. Berries of all kinds, all the dark leafy greens like kale and chard, as well as dark orange squashes and red bell peppers are all good sources of antioxidants. Blueberries, especially, have been shown to keep your brain cells from deteriorating.

Other important contributors to good brain health include the B vitamins, which act to help neurotransmitters do their jobs. These are the chemicals that send messages between our neurons. B6, folate and choline are especially helpful, though it's important to remember that all the B vitamins need to work together. Dark greens and whole grains are the best source of B vitamins. Phosphatidylcholine ("lecithin") is another helpful form of choline and is found in eggs and soybeans.

Inflammatory chemicals in our bodies are produced by excess sugar as well. Obvious sources of sugar are candies, cakes, cookies, soda and alcohol. However, excess starches --especially refined versions, like white flour and "regular" semolina pasta -- also get converted to sugar and lead to trouble. Even excess fruit isn't a good idea, especially if it means you aren't eating

vegetables. Limiting simple sugars to rare occasions and fruit to only 2 servings a day is the best idea. The main exception to this is dark chocolate! It has been shown to have loads of antioxidants and minerals, so help yourself to a small piece. Make it dark, and make it simply chocolate, not a “chocolate covered” something. Then take a few deep breaths to relax and do the crossword puzzle to keep your brain alive!