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10 Brain Foods for Kids

As fast as children whiz from classroom to activity to home and back again, their brains are just as actively and dramatically growing and changing.

"These years are critical for brain development, and what they eat affects focus and skills," psychiatrist Drew Ramsey, MD, coauthor of *The Happiness Diet*, says.

Food is one of many factors that affect a child's brain development.

The following 10 foods can help kids stay sharp all day long, and affect brain development well into the future.

1. Eggs

Eating a high-nutrient protein like eggs (which have nutrients including choline, omega-3 fatty acids, zinc, and lutein) will help kids concentrate, Beth Saltz, RD, says.

How to Serve It: Fold scrambled eggs into a whole-grain tortilla for a filling breakfast or afternoon snack. "The protein-carb combo tides kids over until the next meal without the induced energy crash," Saltz says.

2. Greek Yogurt

Fat is important to brain health, says Laura Lagano, RD. A full-fat Greek yogurt (which has more protein than other yogurts) can help keep brain cell membranes flexible, helping them send and receive information.

How to Serve It: Pack Greek yogurt in lunch with some fun mix-ins: cereal with at least 3 grams of fiber and blueberries for a dose of nutrients called polyphenols.

Or add a few dark chocolate chips. Polyphenols in cocoa are thought to keep the mind sharp by hiking brain blood flow.

3. Greens

Full of folate and vitamins, spinach and kale are part of a healthy diet linked to lowering the risk of getting dementia later in life. "Kale contains sulforaphane, a molecule that has detoxifying abilities, and diindolylmethane, which helps new brain cells grow," says Ramsey, coauthor of *50 Shades of Kale*.

How to Serve It:

- Whip spinach into smoothies for snack time.
- Add it to omelets.

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- Saute it at dinner drizzled with olive oil (the dash of fat helps your body absorb vitamins).

Make chips out of kale: Cut kale from stems/ribs, drizzle with olive oil and a bit of salt, and bake.

4. Purple Cauliflower

Low in sugar, high in fiber, and full of folate and B6 that help regulate mood, memory, and attention, purple cauliflower also delivers inflammation-fighting nutrients called anthocyanins.

How to Serve It: Roast and puree cauliflower to make a nutritious dipping sauce for other veggies such as peppers, celery, and radishes.

5. Fish

Naturally fatty fish are a good source of vitamin D and omega-3s, which protect the brain against cognitive decline and memory loss. Salmon, tuna, and sardines are all rich in omega-3s.

"The more omega-3s we can get to the brain, the better it will function and the better we will be able to focus," says Bonnie Taub-Dix, RD, author of *Read It Before You Eat It*.

How to Serve It: Grill it, roast it, or add it to a salad or sandwich.

6. "Clean" Meat

"Animal fat is where pesticides and antibiotics are stored. A high toxic load can contribute to brain fog," Lagano says. For better behavior and focus, choose meats (and other foods) that are free of artificial ingredients, dyes, flavoring, preservatives, and sweeteners.

How to Serve It: Ditch deli sandwich meat for preservative-free roast beef left over from last night's "clean" dinner.

7. Nuts and Seeds

Packed with protein, essential fatty acids, and vitamins and minerals, nuts and seeds can help boost mood and keep your nervous system happy.

How to Serve It: Spread sunflower seed butter -- rich in folate, vitamin E, and selenium -- on a whole-grain cracker or bread. Or make pesto: Nuts combined with olive oil and dark leafy greens make a healthful sauce for whole-grain pasta.

8. Oatmeal

Protein- and fiber-rich oatmeal helps keep heart and brain arteries clear. In one study, children who ate sweetened oatmeal did better on memory-related academic tasks than those who ate a sugary cereal.

How to Serve It: Add cinnamon. Compounds in the spice may protect brain cells, previous research shows.

9. Apples and Plums

Kids often crave sweets, especially when they're feeling sluggish. Apples and plum: lunchbox-friendly and contain quercetin, an antioxidant that may fight cognitive decline according to lab studies.

How to Serve It: The good stuff is often in the skin of fruit, so buy organic and wash

10. Turmeric

"The curcumin in turmeric can actually make the brain grow," Ramsey says. He says curcumin fights inflammation and blocks Alzheimer's plaque formation.

How to Serve It: Visit an Indian restaurant or experiment with Indian recipes. Even if a child just eats the puri (fried bread), they'll likely get some curcumin benefits and be more adventurous eaters.

SOURCES: Tanya Remer Altmann, MD, FAAP, spokeswoman, American Academy of Pediatrics. Editor-in-chief of the American Academy of Pediatrics parenting book, *The Wonder Years*, Bantam, 2007. Drew Ramsey, MD, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry, College of Physicians & Surgeons; coauthor, *The Happiness Diet*, Rodale, 2012, and *50 Shades of Kale*, HarperWave, 2011. RD, CDN, integrative clinical nutritionist, Laura Lagano Nutrition LLC, New York/New Jersey. Bonnie Taub-Dix, MA, RD, CD Consultants, LLC, New York; author, *Read It Before You Eat It*, Plume, 2010. Beth Satz, MPH, RD, Los Angeles. University of California, Los Angeles. *Journal of Nutrition*, 2011. Zick, S. *BMC Complementary Alternative Medicine*, published online, Sept 22, 2011. Peterson, D. *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, 2009. Nurk, E. *The Journal of Nutrition*, published online, Dec 3, 2008. Francis, S. *Journal of Cardiovascular Pharmacology*, 2006. Environmental Working Group: "2013 Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce." *Cornell Chronicle*: "An Apple Protects Against Brain-Cell Damage That Triggers Alzheimer's." *UCLA Magazine*: "Food Is Like a Pharmaceutical Compound."

Reviewed by Patricia Quinn, MD on 5/23/2013

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