

Eat Well for Your Heart and Benefit Your Brain

Anyone who eats a heart-smart diet will be happy to know that what's good for the heart is also good for the brain, experts say. Nutrition researchers say the same eating patterns that protect us against the risk of heart disease can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease. "There's no magic pill to prevent Alzheimer's but the factors causing it may be triggered by lifestyle choices," says Kathy Hickman, education manager with the Alzheimer Society of Ontario.

Hickman says the best brain foods are in your local supermarket. She advocates foods that are as minimally processed as possible. "An apple contains fiber and nutrients, but if you peel the skin, core it and add sugar for apple sauce, you've drastically reduced the amount of fiber and loaded up with sugar." The main four food groups - fruits and vegetables, grains, dairy products and meat, especially poultry and fish – provide the basics of good nutrition.

The brain, to function well, needs a diet rich in unsaturated fats. DHA, the omega-3 fatty acid found in fish such as salmon and mackerel, is essential for brain development and helps slow the growth of lesions associated with Alzheimer's disease. Soy products, flax and walnuts are rich sources of omega-3. Blueberries, the ideal brain berry, contain potassium, vitamin C and B vitamins. They also have anti-oxidants that enhance cognitive abilities and anti-inflammatory properties. Dark green, leafy vegetables, such as spinach and kale, are also rich in B vitamins. Hickman says, "We need vitamin B, especially vitamin B12. If it's lacking, progressive nerve degeneration may result." Vitamin B12 is found in liver, shellfish, sardines, some cheeses and eggs. She also recommends exercise for optimal health, "A variety of exercises several times a week will increase heart health, circulation of blood and nutrients to the brain." It may well be that combining a good diet with exercise, brain exercises and an active social life will create the best prevention plan for heart disease and dementia.