

Twenty Foods to Boost Brain Health (Print)

Pondering what cooking options are best for your brain? Here's some food for thought.

Tiffani Franada, DO, is a neurologist with OSF HealthCare who specializes in Multiple Sclerosis. Part of her passion is working with patients choosing brain-healthy diets and lifestyle, which prevents neurological diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Multiple Sclerosis.

The MIND diet

"The MIND diet is a combination of the Mediterranean diet, which is healthy fats, olive oils, fish, fruits and vegetables. And the DASH diet, which is a low-sodium diet," Dr. Franada says. "It's particularly helpful for patients who live with hypertension (high blood pressure). The two of those combined seem to be very effective at preventing the development of Alzheimer's."

Patients on the Mediterranean diet often have lower levels of inflammatory markers in their spinal fluid. Higher levels are suggestive of Alzheimer's. Patients also perform better on cognitive testing, Dr. Franada adds.

Fiber-rich foods

"In regard to carbs, **whole grains** are probably best, and they have really good fiber in them. As well as things like **legumes** and **beans** which have good fiber levels, which make you feel full for longer," Dr. Franada says.

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) lists many high-fiber foods [here](#). **Lentils, vegetable soups, whole-wheat bread** and **pasta** make the list. As well as fruits and vegetables like **apples, apricots, broccoli** and **Brussels sprouts**.

Berries and antioxidant production

"**Blueberries** are great, really berries of all kinds. They really help that antioxidant production," Dr. Franada says. "For vegetables, **leafy greens** are really helpful. They have a good amount of folic acid, which helps to reduce homocysteine (amino acid) in the brain. Homocysteine promotes inflammation and shrinkage in the brain, and we want to reduce that."

"Fats are not the enemy"

The word "fat" oftentimes has a negative connotation to it. Dr. Franada says there are healthy fats out there that offer benefits to brain health.

"Fats are not the enemy. Healthy fats are good for the brain. Your brain requires them, like **fatty fish** (salmon), which have good Omega-3s in them. If you don't eat fish, **flax seed** is a great alternative," Dr. Franada says.

"**Walnuts** also have great, healthy fat in them. As well as **olive oil**, which has monounsaturated fatty acids which protects against inflammation in the brain."

Lean meats, like chicken and turkey, can be good for brain health because there's healthy amounts of protein and fiber in them, Dr. Franada says.

Don't dismiss dark chocolate!

"**Dark chocolate** is great. Dark chocolate has good amounts of antioxidants. Of course, all things in moderation. But a dark chocolate square once a night, not a bad thing," Dr. Franada says. "Also, caffeine! Believe it or not, a cup of caffeine, like **coffee** or **tea**, can help with focus, attention and is helpful for the brain."

Dr. Franada recommends having your caffeinated drink of choice early in the morning, right when you wake up, instead of later in the day. Having it later in the day can give you a lot of energy, which leads to you not sleeping well at night. Sleep is also extremely important for brain health.

Foods to avoid

[Ultra-processed foods](#) have been trending lately, with health experts giving them more attention than usual because of their negative effects on people's health. High sodium, added sugars and excessive amounts of bad fat headline are the reasons why we should avoid them, with these elements being linked to diabetes, obesity and cancer.

Obesity is typically part of a metabolic syndrome, where a person has elevated blood sugars, blood pressure and cholesterol. This puts patients at risk for stroke, sleep apnea, Alzheimer's and many other health issues. Those risk factors can put someone at risk for neurological disease.

"Heavily processed foods are not great for the brain or the heart. Excess sugars, like added sugars, should be avoided as well. If you're going to have sugar, have something with natural sugar in it," Dr. Franada says. "Berries are much preferred to things with added sugars. Also, white bread and processed carbs should be avoided, too."

Effect on white brain matter

"There's some real-world data showing that the Mediterranean diet can prevent white matter changes on the brain, which are little white spots that develop on patients' brains as they get older. It's also seen in patients with vascular risk factors," Dr. Franada says. "If you follow the Mediterranean diet pretty strictly, you can prevent getting those white spots. They also found people who adhere to that diet have better structural integrity. The left and right sides of the brain talk better to one another."

What about cheat days?

If you exercise five or six days a week and give yourself a "cheat day" where you splurge a bit, evaluate how the food feels in your body. Instead of packing on the calories and going bananas, Dr. Franada recommends reeling it in a bit and focusing on moderation.

"You'll probably start to recognize it doesn't feel so great," Dr. Franada says. "Maybe it's a chocolate dessert at night, or something smaller that you can do to still stay with your healthy diet, just in smaller quantities."

Dr. Franada cautions against super rigid diets that make you "fall off the wagon" after a few weeks. "You have to find something that's sustainable for you," Dr. Franada adds.