



# Chewing Gum Makes You Smarter

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e all know to eat a healthy diet, but some brain-boosting foods may surprise you...

## BRAIN BOOSTERS

■ **Chewing gum.** OK, it's not exactly a food, but it's more than just something to keep your mouth occupied. Researchers at Northwestern University found that people who chew gum have increased blood flow to the brain -- and a corresponding increase in cognitive performance. People who chew gum also report a reduction in stress, which protects brain cells from stress-related hormones.

**Recommended:** Chew gum when you are stressed or have challenging mental work to do. Opt for sugarless.

■ **Frozen berries.** Raspberries, blueberries and strawberries are among the best sources of brain-protecting antioxidants. Researchers at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University found that animals given blueberries showed virtually no evidence in the brain of the cell-damaging effects of free radicals -- and they did better on cognitive tests.

Frozen berries typically contain more antioxidants than fresh berries because they're picked and processed at the peak of ripeness.

**Recommended:** One-and-a-half cups of frozen or fresh berries at least two to three times a week. Darker berries contain the most antioxidants.

■ **Turmeric.** It's one of the most potent anti-inflammatory spices. People who eat turmeric several times a week can have significant drops in *C-reactive protein*, a substance that indicates inflammation in the brain and other tissues.

A study that looked at more than 1,000 participants (average age 68.9) found that those who often or occasionally ate turmeric performed better on mental-status evaluations than those who rarely or never ate it.

**Recommended:** Add at least one-quarter teaspoon of turmeric to recipes several times a week. (Turmeric is one of the spices in curry.)

■ **Hazelnuts.** These contain the highest concentration of folate of all the tree nuts (including walnuts, almonds and pecans). Low levels of folate have been associated with poor

cognition and depression. Other foods rich in folate include spinach, beans, oranges, avocados and wheat germ.

**Recommended:** A handful of hazelnuts several times a week.

■ **Cilantro.** This herb, also known as coriander and Chinese parsley, has long been used in Iranian folk medicine for stress relief. Stress has been linked to a speeding up of the aging process of the brain. Modern research also has revealed the benefits of cilantro -- an animal study demonstrated that cilantro eased stress.

**Recommended:** One tablespoon of fresh cilantro several times a week. It's often used in salsa and guacamole and to top tacos, chili, stews and soups.

### THREE "GOOD" VICES

You may have heard that certain "bad foods," such as coffee, red wine and chocolate, are good for the heart. They also are good for the brain...

■ **Coffee.** A Finnish study of more than 1,400 participants found that regular coffee drinkers were less likely to develop dementia than those who didn't drink coffee. Those who drank moderate amounts of coffee in midlife (three to five cups daily) had the lowest risk, probably because the antioxidants in coffee inhibit age-related brain damage.

The caffeine in coffee -- a five-ounce serving of coffee typically contains 30 milligrams (mg) to 150 mg, depending on how it is prepared -- also improves mental abilities. Studies of university students have shown that when students drink coffee before a test, they score higher than when they abstain.

**Recommended:** One to three cups daily. If coffee gives you the jitters, try green tea, which also is good for the brain but has slightly less caffeine.

■ **Red wine.** Red wine contains *resveratrol*, a polyphenol, that helps prevent inflammation and oxidation of brain tissue. People who drink moderate amounts of red wine have lower risks for stroke and dementia. Laboratory studies indicate that red wine can reduce the accumulation of beta-amyloid, the substance found in the brains of Alzheimer's patients. (In a healthy brain, *beta-amyloid* is broken down and eliminated.) White wine also contains polyphenols but in lower concentrations than reds.

**Recommended:** Up to two glasses of wine daily for men and one glass daily for women. Moderation is important because too much alcohol has been linked to *increased* risk for dementia.

**Alcohol-free option:** Concord grape juice. Some studies suggest that it may be just as healthy as red wine when it comes to improvement in cognitive skills. Aim for one cup a day.

■ **Chocolate.** The cocoa flavonols in chocolate inhibit free radicals. Flavonols also relax the linings of blood vessels. This helps reduce high blood pressure, a leading cause of dementia.

One study, conducted at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, found that participants who drank one cup of high-flavonol cocoa daily had, after two weeks, an average increase in brain circulation of about one-third.

Chocolates with a high percentage of cocoa don't necessarily have a high concentration of flavonols -- processing techniques can destroy the protective compounds.

**Recommended:** Look for products that advertise a high flavonol content on the label (60% to 85%). One ounce is enough to get the benefits without unnecessary sugar and calories.

### **DON'T FORGET FISH**

You probably have heard that fish is "brain food," but we couldn't do a brain-boosting article without mentioning it. A study of 3,660 adults age 65 and older found that those who ate omega-3-rich fish three times a week or more were 25% less likely to have silent *infarcts*, blockages in blood vessels that can cause dementia.