



## 20 Foods That Make You Smarter

By Sara Ost, EcoSalon

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Simply put, your brain likes to eat. And it likes powerful fuel: quality fats, antioxidants, and small, steady amounts of the best carbs.

On a deadline? Need to rally? Avoid the soda, vending machine snacks and tempting Starbucks and go for these powerful brain boosters instead. The path to a bigger, better brain is loaded with Omega-3 fats, antioxidants, and fiber. Give your brain a kick start: eat the following foods on a daily or weekly basis for results you will notice.

### 20 foods that will supercharge your brain:

#### 1. Avocado

Start each day with a mix of high-quality protein and beneficial fats to build the foundation for an energized day. Avocado with scrambled eggs provides both, and the monounsaturated fat helps blood circulate better, which is essential for optimal brain function. Worst alternative: a trans-fat-filled, sugar-laden cream cheese Danish.

*Green it: you don't need to buy an organic avocado – conventional is fine. But make sure your supplementary protein is free range, cage free, or organic.*

#### 2. Blueberries

These delicious berries are one of the best foods for you, period, but they're very good for your brain as well. Since they're high in fiber and low on the glycemic index, they are safe for diabetics and they do not spike blood sugar. Blueberries are possibly the best brain food on earth: they have been linked to reduced risk for Alzheimer's, shown to improve learning ability and motor skills in rats, and they are one of the most powerful anti-stress foods you can eat. Avoid: dried, sweetened blueberries.

*Green it: buy local and organic, and be mindful of seasonality. When blueberries are out of season, opt for cranberries, grapes, goji berries, blackberries or cherries to get your brain boost.*

#### 3. Wild Salmon

Omega-3 fatty acids are essential for your brain. These beneficial fats are linked to improved cognition and alertness, reduced risk of degenerative mental disease (such as dementia), improved memory, improved mood, and reduced depression, anxiety and hyperactivity. Wild salmon is a premium source, but we'll highlight a few other sources on this list for vegetarians and people who just don't like salmon. Avoid farmed (read: sea lice infested) salmon.

*Green it: the California salmon stock is threatened, so choose wild Alaskan salmon only, and eat small portions no more than twice a week.*

#### 4. Nuts

Nuts contain protein, high amounts of fiber, and they are rich in beneficial fats. For getting an immediate energy boost that won't turn into a spike later, you can't do better than nuts. The complex carbs will perk you up while the fat and protein will sustain you. Nuts also contain plenty of vitamin E, which is essential to cognitive function. You don't have to eat raw, plain, unsalted nuts, but do avoid the ones with a lot of sweetening or seasoning blends. Filberts, hazelnuts, cashews, and walnuts are great choices, with almonds being the king of nuts.

For those avoiding carbs, macadamia nuts are much higher in fat than most nuts. By the way, peanuts just aren't ideal. Aside from the fact that many people are allergic, peanuts have less healthy fat than many other types of nuts...maybe that's because peanuts are not actually a nut! They're still much better than a candy bar, however.

*Green it: try to choose organic, raw nuts, and if you can't get those, at least avoid the tins of heavily-seasoned, preservative-laden nuts that may have taken many food miles to get to your mouth.*

#### 5. Seeds

Try sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, flax seed, and tahini (a tangy, nutty sesame butter that tastes great in replacement of mayo and salad dressing). Seeds contain a lot of protein, beneficial fat, and vitamin E, as well as stress-fighting antioxidants and important brain-boosting minerals like magnesium.

*Green it: Again, just look for organic and try to avoid the highly-seasoned, processed options. In general, things like fruits, vegetables, seeds and nuts are pretty low-impact, environmentally speaking, in comparison to meats and cheeses.*

#### 6. Coffee

Thine eyes do not deceive (even if you are in the midst of a sugar crash). Coffee is good for your brain. Did you know coffee actually contains fiber? That's going to help your cardiovascular system. Coffee also exerts some noted benefit to your brain in addition to providing you with a detectable energy boost.

The trick is not to have more than a few cups. But you can safely enjoy 2-4 cups

daily – we *are* talking about supercharging here. Just please don't go ruining a good thing by loading it up with sugar! Espresso beans are actually a phenomenally healthy snack, by the way.

*Green it: brew yourself some fair-trade organic coffee to benefit both the planet and the workers who grow your beans. Use a thermos instead of a throwaway cup.*

## 7. Oatmeal

Nature's scrub brush is one of the best foods for cardiovascular health, which translates to brain health. Additionally, oatmeal is packed with fiber, a reasonable amount of protein, and even a small amount of Omega-3's. It's a good grain that will sustain you throughout the morning so you aren't prone to irritability or an energy crash.

*Green it: the healthiest oatmeal is the real, steel-cut deal. Steer clear of those little microwavable packets that are loaded with sugar. All that packaging isn't very green.*

## 8. Beans

One more for carb-lovers. (The brain uses about 20% of your carbohydrate intake and it likes a consistent supply.) Beans are truly an amazing food that is sadly overlooked. They're humble, but very smart. Not only are they loaded with fiber, vitamins, minerals and protein, they're ridiculously cheap. An entire bag of beans usually costs only a few dollars and will provide many meals. Beans provide a steady, slow release of glucose to your brain – which means energy all day without the sugar crash. Don't go eating a whole platter of *frijoles*, though – just 1/4 of a cup is fine.

*Green it: look for heirloom beans that are raised sustainably, like those from Rancho Gordo.*

## 9. Pomegranate

Opt for the fruit over the juice so you get more fiber. Pomegranates contain blueberry-like levels of antioxidants, which are essential for a healthy brain. Your brain is the first organ to feel the effects of stress, so anything you can do to offset stress is a smart choice.

*Green it: pomegranates are seasonal and not generally local for most of us, so enjoy sparingly and rely on other berries like acai, grapes and cherries when you can't get this fruit.*

## 10. Brown Rice

Brown rice is a low-glycemic complex carbohydrate that is excellent for people sensitive to gluten who still want to maintain cardiovascular health. The better your

circulation, the sharper your brain.

*Green it: don't buy the excessively-packaged "boil in a bag" rice packets. Just make up a big batch of brown rice in a rice cooker on Sunday so you have it on hand for easy lunches all week.*

## 11. Tea

You have to brew tea fresh or you won't get the benefits of all those catechines (antioxidants) that boost your brain. Because tea has caffeine, don't have more than 2-3 cups daily.

*Green it: buy organic, fair trade loose leaf or packets to support sustainable business practices.*

## 12. Chocolate

Things are looking increasingly better for chocolate. It's got brain-boosting compounds, it's loaded with antioxidants, and it has just the right amount of caffeine. Chocolate sends your serotonin through the roof, so you'll feel happy in short order. Dark chocolate is also rich in fiber. (Remember, fiber = healthy cardiovascular system = healthy brain.)

*Green it: go for super dark, fair-trade, pure organic chocolate, not the sugary, processed milk chocolate candy bars.*

## 13. Oysters

Oysters are rich in selenium, magnesium, protein and several other nutrients vital to brain health. In one study researchers found that men who ate oysters reported significantly improved cognition and mood! Not all shellfish are good for you but oysters are a sure bet.

*Green it: oysters are actually one of the most eco-friendly seafood options, so eat up!*

## 14. Olive Oil

Though we know the brain does need a small, steady supply of glucose, don't overlook fat. Studies have consistently shown that a low-fat diet is not the health boon we hoped it would be (remember the 90s low-fat craze?). In fact, avoiding fat can increase foggy thinking, mood swings, and insomnia. A diet rich in healthy fats is essential to clear thinking, good memory, and a balanced mood. Your brain is made of fat, after all.

One study of men found that those who relied on the processed vegetable fats found in salad dressings, snacks and prepared foods had 75% higher rates of mental degradation (dementia, memory loss) than men who ate healthy fats. Most processed foods and fast foods use corn oil, palm oil, soybean oil and other

Omega-6 fats. You don't want Omega 6 fats. Even saturated fat is safer than Omega 6's.

Choose healthy fats such as those present in olive oil, nut butters, nuts and seeds, flax, oily fish, and avocados. Avoid processed fats found in pastries, chips, candy bars, snacks, junk food, fried foods and prepared foods. Eating the wrong fat can literally alter your brain's communication pathways.

*Green it: look for organic, local, or farmers' market options when it comes to your food. You should also explore herbal remedies for mood swings and brain health.*

## 15. Tuna

In addition to being another rich source of Omega-3's, tuna, particularly yellowfin, has the highest level of vitamin B6 of any food. Studies have shown that B6 is directly linked to memory, cognition and long term brain health. Generally, the B vitamins are among the most important for balancing your mood. B6 in particular influences dopamine receptors (dopamine is one of your "feel good" hormones along with serotonin).

My personal cocktail: SAMe (nature's happiness molecule) and a mega-dose of B-complex keeps me humming even when I've got a mountain of work to do. Which, like you, is all the time.

*Green it: only eat tuna from sustainable fisheries, and if you're looking for a B6 source that is vegetarian, opt for a banana, which contains a third of your day's requirement (tuna offers nearly 60%).*

## 16. Garlic

Garlic – the fresher the better – is one of the most potent nutritional weapons in your arsenal. Eat it as much as your significant other can stand. Not only is it fabulous for reducing bad cholesterol and strengthening your cardiovascular system, it exerts a protective antioxidant effect on the brain.

Avoid: I know it makes life easier, but don't even think about buying the chopped or peeled garlic. Nutritional benefits = zero.

*Green it: just choose organic, and go for local if you can get it.*

## 17. Eggs

Eggs contain protein and fat to provide energy to your brain for hours, and the selenium in organic eggs is proven to help your mood. You really needn't worry about the overblown cholesterol fears. (I have quite a bit to say on this topic but I'll restrain myself for once.)

*Green it: choose organic, free range, vegetarian fed eggs.*

## 18. Green Leafy Vegetables

Spinach, kale, chard, romaine, arugula, lolla rossa – whatever green you like, eat it daily. Green, leafy vegetables are high in iron (slightly less "green" iron sources include beef, pork and lamb). Americans tend to be deficient in iron, which is too bad, because the deficiency is linked to restless leg syndrome, fatigue, poor mood, foggy thinking, and other cognition issues.

*Green it: choose organic, and shop at your farmers' market or order from a local CSA. Leave out the red meat a few days a week and rely on a big, well-seasoned green stir fry or salad.*

## 19. Tomatoes

Go figure, but tomatoes don't usually make the brain-boosting food lists. (Thank goodness I found the one that did so I'm not the only one.) Tomatoes contain lycopene, an antioxidant that is particularly good for your brain – it even helps prevent dementia. You have to cook tomatoes to get the lycopene – take that, raw foodies! Just kidding. But this *does* mean that ketchup is good for your brain. Although because of the sugar in it, you should look to other sources for most of your lycopene intake, such as fresh tomato sauce.

*Green it: try to eat tomatoes that are local and get your lycopene in vitamin form when tomatoes aren't in season. You'll know when that is – the tomatoes will be pale, tasteless, and pithy.*

## 20. Cacao nibs

That's right, I'm putting chocolate on this list twice. My boyfriend knows I need it. I eat chocolate or cacao nibs daily and I think you might want to consider it, too. Cacao nibs are among the top five most powerful brain foods, right next to wild salmon and blueberries. My girlfriends and I like to mix cacao nibs with frozen blueberries and a generous splash of organic heavy cream while we watch really bad television on Sunday nights.

*Green it: as long as it's fair trade and organic, it's green.*

### Things that drain your brain:

**Alcohol** kills your brain cells outright! Alcohol also interferes with dopamine production. Moderate amounts of alcohol, particularly resveratrol-rich red wine, can help improve your health, but anything beyond a glass or two of wine daily is a recipe for reduced brain function and energy loss.

**Corn Syrup and Sugar** lead to health problems like diabetes and obesity, and they're terrible for your brain. Don't eat sugar except on special occasions or as an infrequent treat. If you can't cut back that much, try to limit yourself to just two bites of whatever tempts you daily.

**Nicotine** constricts blood flow to the brain, so while it may "soothe" jittery nerves, smoking will actually reduce your brain function severely – and the effects are cumulative.

**A high carbohydrate lunch** will make you sleepy and sluggish. Opt for a light meal with some quality protein, such as a salad with grilled chicken breast or vegetables and hummus or wild American shrimp and avocado.

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