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Can certain foods stave off dementia?

Here's what science says about whether your diet can counteract cognitive decline

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Walnuts can improve cognitive function. Blueberries can boost memory. Fish oil supplements can lower your risk of Alzheimer's disease.

You may have noticed these buzzy 'brain food' claims scattered across online health articles and social media feeds. But can certain foods or diets really stave off or prevent dementia?

A 'brain-boosting' diet

Scientists don't yet know for certain what causes Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. And there is no medication that can reverse it, said Dr Uma Naidoo, the director of nutritional and metabolic psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, US, and author of *This Is Your Brain on Food*.

Two diets in particular, the Mediterranean diet and the MIND diet — both of which encourage fresh produce, legumes and nuts, fish, whole grains and olive oil — have been shown in scientific studies to offer strong protection against cognitive decline.

"Pretty much anything that will help keep arteries healthy will reduce risk of dementia," said Dr Walter Willett, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, US.

Leafy greens

Leafy greens are packed with nutrients and fibre, and some solid evidence has linked them with slower age-related cognitive decline.

In one randomised controlled trial performed in Israel and published this year, for instance, researchers took brain scans of more than 200 people who had been split into three diet groups. They found that after 18 months, those who followed a

'green' Mediterranean diet — one rich in Mankai (a nutrient-packed green plant), green tea and walnuts — had the slowest rate of age-related brain atrophy. Those who followed a traditional Mediterranean diet were close behind. Those who followed regular healthy diet guidelines — which was less plant-based and allowed for more processed and red meat than the other two diets — had greater declines in brain volume.

Colourful fruits and vegetables

The more colourful the produce on your plate, the better the food usually is for your brain, several experts have said. In one 2021 observational study, researchers followed more than 77,000 people for about 20 years. They found that those with diets high in flavonoids — natural substances found in colourful fruits and vegetables, chocolate and wine — were less likely than those who consumed fewer flavonoids to report signs of cognitive aging.

Fatty fish

Many types of seafood are good sources of omega-3 fatty acids, which have been long associated with better brain health and reduced risk of age-related dementia or cognitive decline.

One specific omega-3 fatty acid — docosahexaenoic acid, or DHA — found in cold-water, fatty fish, like salmon, is "the most prevalent brain fat".

Nuts, whole grains, legumes and olive oil

Nuts and seeds are also linked to slower cognitive decline. In one 2021 review of 22 studies on nut consumption involving nearly 44,000 people, researchers found that those at high risk of cognitive decline tended to have better outcomes if they ate more nuts — specifically walnuts.

Whole grains, as well as legumes, like lentils and soybeans, also appear to have benefits for heart health and cognitive function. In one 2017 study of more than 200 people in Italy aged 65 and older, researchers found an association between consuming three servings of legumes per week and higher cognitive performance.

One 2022 study of over 92,000 US adults found that higher intakes of olive oil were associated with a 29 per cent lower risk of dying from neurodegenerative disease — and eight per cent to 34 per cent lower risk of mortality overall — when

oil. compared with those who never or rarely consumed olive