- Diet / Intellect

self-care

Can diet improve your IQ?

Science shows that food has an impact on our mental health and emotional wellbeing, but can it make us smarter?

words VICKY CHANDLER



Intelligence is viewed as a fixed trait, largely determined by genetics. But there are things that can supposedly help: learning a new language, playing an instrument, doing brain puzzles, reading more. But how about eating better? In fact, if 'you are what you eat', can you give yourself a brain boost through diet?

While there's no magic ingredient to make you smarter, studies have found a link between dietary choices and brain health, cognitive function and mental wellbeing. The food you eat can help your brain perform at its best.

What does your brain feed on?

Your brain is one of the most energy-hungry organs in the body, consuming around 20% of your daily calories. Just like a high-performance machine, it requires specific nutrients to fuel thinking, memory and problem solving.

Your brain primarily runs on glucose, which it gets from complex carbohydrates found in things like wholegrains, fruit and vegetables which provide a steady release of energy. It also relies heavily on healthy fats. Omega-3s, specifically DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) are critical for brain health.

"DHA makes up about 30% of the brain's fatty acids and is essential for the formation of new brain cells and communication between them," explains registered nutritionist Rebecca Taylor. "B vitamins are essential for the production of neurotransmitters, chemicals that transmit signals to the brain," she adds. "Vitamin B6 is also involved in the production of what are often called the 'happy hormones', serotonin and dopamine. Meanwhile, B12 is crucial for the formation of something called myelin which helps nerve cells communicate efficiently."

Iron is another essential nutrient for supporting brain health as it's essential in delivering oxygen to brain cells, which in turn is crucial for cognitive function and energy levels. Rebecca stresses the importance of correct iron intake in young children as it may "impair brain development, leading to poor concentration and learning difficulties".

Antioxidants are another key player in supporting brain health – things like vitamin E, flavonoids and polyphenols that help protect your brain from oxidative stress, which is linked to cognitive ageing. ►

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The 5 best brain foods

There are so many great, healthy foods that can support good brain function. Rebecca recommends starting with her five favourites:

Nuts and seeds
Things like walnuts, almonds and flaxseed provide healthy fats, antioxidants and vitamin E, protecting brain cells and potentially slowing cognitive decline.

Wholegrains
Oats, brown rice and quinoa provide that steady glucose supply to the brain, promoting sustained focus and concentration throughout the day.

Fatty fish
Oily fish like salmon, mackerel and sardines are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which support brain cell structure and neural communication, and may reduce neurodegenerative disease risks.

Berries
Berries, particularly blueberries, are packed with antioxidants and flavonoids that combat oxidative stress and promote brain plasticity, enhancing memory and cognitive performance.

Leafy greens
Green vegetables like spinach, kale and broccoli are rich in folate and vitamin K, which support cognitive function and mood regulation.

This is also a good time to mention gut-healthy foods and the communication between our gut and our brain (known as the gut-brain axis). This connection is becoming increasingly important in research on brain health.

"The gut is home to trillions of bacteria that play a role in digesting food and producing various chemicals that affect brain function, including neurotransmitters like serotonin," Rebecca says. "Around 90% of serotonin is produced in the gut, so maintaining a healthy microbiome is key for mood regulation and cognitive health."

That's why a diet rich in prebiotics (wholegrains, fruits and vegetables) and probiotics (yogurt, kefir and kimchi) may in turn enhance brain function and protect against cognitive decline.

Eating regular meals throughout the day also ensures a steady supply of energy to the brain. That's why skipping meals or having irregular eating patterns can lead to blood sugar fluctuations which may impair concentration and cognitive function.

Rebecca recommends small balanced snacks containing protein, healthy fats and fibre between meals that may help sustain energy levels and cognitive performance. ►

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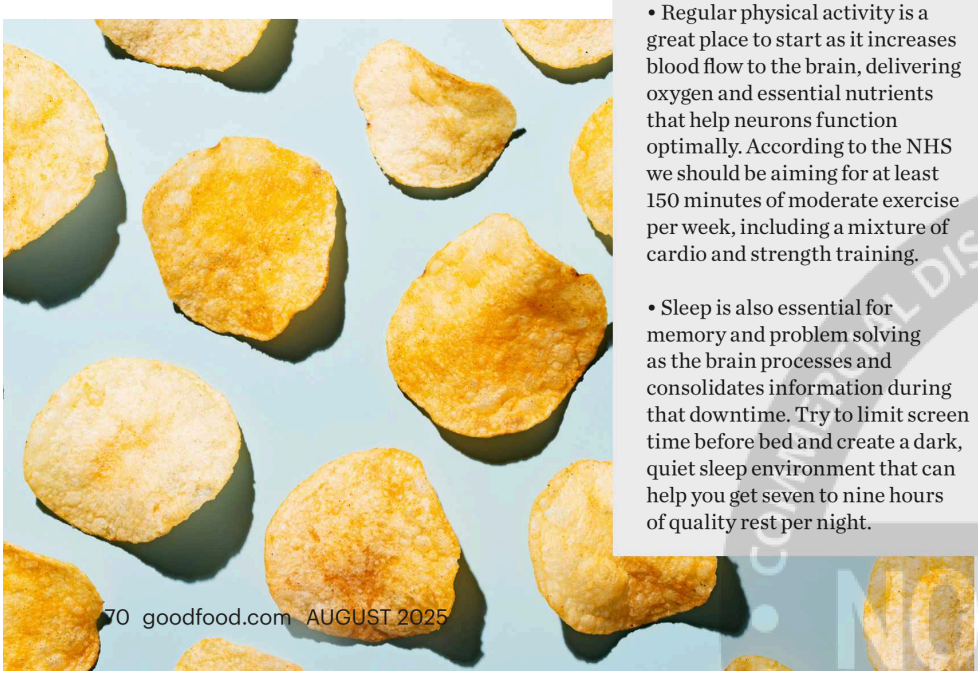
health

These foods can muddle your thinking

Just as some foods sharpen your mind, regular consumption of certain foods can dull it. Diets high in processed foods, sugars and unhealthy fats can impair cognitive function, and even increase the risk of neurodegenerative diseases.

- **Sugary drinks and snacks** can cause blood sugar spikes and crashes which can lead to brain fog and difficulty focusing.
- **Ultra-processed foods** like fast food and certain packaged snacks that contain additives and preservatives can impair memory and cognition over time.
- **Trans fats** found in fried foods, margarine and some baked goods may contribute to inflammation, and have been linked to cognitive decline.
- **Excessive alcohol consumption** can interfere with neurotransmitters, leading to impaired cognitive function and memory loss.
- **High-sodium foods** can raise blood pressure and reduce blood flow to the brain.





Other ways to get an IQ boost

While diet plays a crucial role in brain health, it's only one piece of the puzzle. Other lifestyle habits can significantly enhance cognitive function, memory and problem-solving skills.

- Regular physical activity is a great place to start as it increases blood flow to the brain, delivering oxygen and essential nutrients that help neurons function optimally. According to the NHS we should be aiming for at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week, including a mixture of cardio and strength training.
- Sleep is also essential for memory and problem solving as the brain processes and consolidates information during that downtime. Try to limit screen time before bed and create a dark, quiet sleep environment that can help you get seven to nine hours of quality rest per night.
- Mental stimulation like puzzles, reading, learning a new skill or engaging in challenging cognitive activities can help form new neural connections, and keep the brain sharp while improving problem-solving abilities and long-term memory.
- The best tip of all, and a great reason to spend more time with friends, is that social connection has been linked to strengthening cognitive resilience. Engaging in meaningful social interactions activates brain regions associated with thinking, problem solving and emotional regulation.

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