

Nutrition News

Department of Human Nutrition



August 2010

Foods for Thought?

Vocabulary, judgment and overall wisdom seem to improve with age. However, a normal part of healthy aging includes a decreased ability of the brain to think, understand, remember and solve certain kinds of problems. This is often referred to as “cognitive decline.” Mild cognitive decline can advance to dementia, which is not a normal part of aging. Sixty to 80 percent of all dementia is of the Alzheimer’s type.

Is it possible to delay or slow the rate of cognitive decline as we get older? The answer is “yes,” at least for some people. Continuing education is a helpful deterrent. Being physically active and eating well also provide many health benefits to the body, including our brains. Specific foods that show promise in protecting against cognitive decline include whole grains, nuts and vegetable oils high in polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats; fish; and nuts, seeds and vegetables high in antioxidant vitamin E, according to Martha Clare Morris, an epidemiologist at

Chicago’s Rush University, who summarized several research studies at a July 2010 symposium in Albuquerque.

Since about one-half or more of the brain is fat, it should not be surprising that dietary fats can affect its function. Diets high in *trans* and saturated fats are associated with more cognitive decline. Substituting these fats with polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats is recommended. To reduce your intake of *trans* and saturated fats, avoid – or at least eat less frequently and in small amounts – bakery products, fried foods, fatty meats, high-fat dairy products, and foods made with coconut and palm kernel oils.

Eating fish once a week helps protect against cognitive decline. Fish should not be battered and fried, but rather should be prepared without added *trans* or saturated fats. The type of polyunsaturated fats known as omega 3 fats may be especially healthful for the brain. Fish highest in omega 3 fats include salmon, anchovies,

mackerel, sardines, trout, whitefish and herring. Plant foods that are also good sources of omega 3 fats include canola oil, soybeans and soybean oil, walnuts, wheat germ, and flax seed meal and oil.

Diets high in vitamin E have been shown to be healthful in multiple ways. They are associated with improved memory and learning, decreased neuron loss, reduced amyloid deposits and reduced risk for Alzheimer’s disease. Adults of all ages are encouraged to eat at least 15 mg vitamin E each day. Dietary sources that naturally provide 3 mg or more of vitamin E include 1/4 cup sunflower seeds, 24 almonds or 1 ounce hazelnuts; 1 tablespoon sunflower or safflower oil; 1 cup tomato sauce or 1/4 cup tomato paste; and 1 cup cooked spinach or turnip greens.

Keeping in mind food choices that are healthful for your mind provides valuable food for thought. And know that foods that are good for your brain are good for the rest of your body, too.

For more information about healthy eating, contact your local extension office.
The Food Assistance Program can help people of all ages with low income buy nutritious foods for a better diet.
To find out more, call toll-free 1-888-369-4777.

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit **Mary Meck Higgins**, Ph.D., R.D., L.D., CDE, Associate Professor, Department of Human Nutrition; Kansas State University; *Foods for Thought?*; August 2010.

K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the well-being of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county Extension offices, experiment fields, area Extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus, Manhattan. This material was funded in part by USDA's Food Stamp Program through a contract with Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only.

No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned. Kansas State University is an equal opportunity provider and employer. **Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service**, Manhattan, Kansas. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.