

Words Anita Bean

ONE SMALL CHANGE



BOOST YOUR

**BRAIN
HEALTH**

Want to keep your brain in tip-top shape? Changing your diet may be the answer

Have you ever turned the house upside down looking for your keys or phone? Or walked into a room only to walk straight back out because you forgot what you came in for? You're not alone – we all experience memory lapses from time to time. Although these can happen at any age, forgetfulness and struggling to recall things is a common part of getting older because of the changing structure and function of the brain. Research suggests cognitive decline can start as early as 45.

Some aspects of memory loss, however, are due to other causes. According to the Alzheimer's Society, there are currently about 900,000 people in the UK with dementia, an umbrella term for a group of symptoms that worsen over time and include memory loss, confusion, language problems and behavioural changes. The Society estimates this number will rise sharply to more than one million by 2025.

The good news is that the condition isn't an inevitable part of ageing. A 2020 report by the Lancet Commission suggests that 40% of cases could be delayed or prevented by tackling 12 risk factors. Evidence shows that looking after your heart health, keeping active – physically and mentally – and staying connected to other people can make a big difference.

Perhaps surprisingly, improving your diet can also have positive results. "There's plenty of evidence that eating a healthy, balanced diet from midlife lessens the chances of cognitive decline," says Dr Susan Mitchell, head of policy at Alzheimer's Research UK. Two ways of eating in particular have been shown to offer protection. These are the Mediterranean diet (for more details of this, see the August issue of *Food* magazine – available digitally on the *Waitrose Food* app or at the bottom of the waitrose.com home page) and the MIND diet – which is itself a hybrid of the Mediterranean diet and the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet. Both of these encourage the consumption of fruit and vegetables, legumes, nuts, fish, wholegrains and olive oil.

9

FOODS FOR A HEALTHY BRAIN

The MIND diet encourages the following foods:



GREEN & LEAFY VEGETABLES

(such as kale, spinach and broccoli) – at least 6 servings per week

ALL OTHER VEGETABLES

1 or more servings per day



NUTS 5 or more servings per week

BERRIES 2 or more servings per week

OLIVE OIL as your main oil for cooking and dressing salads



WHOLEGRAINS 3 or more servings per day

LEGUMES (including beans, lentils and soya) – 4 or more servings per week

POULTRY 2 or more servings per week

FISH/SEAFOOD (ideally oily fish such as salmon and sardines) – at least 1 serving a week

A study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* analysed the diets and cognitive performance of more than 5,900 older adults. Researchers found that those who stuck most closely to either the Mediterranean diet or the MIND diet had a 30-35% lower risk of cognitive impairment than those who followed these diets less closely. Another US study, published in *BMC Medicine* and involving more than 60,000 people, found that strict adherence to the Mediterranean diet was associated with a 23% lower risk of dementia.

One simple but significant change you can make to your eating habits right away is to introduce more plant-based foods. "A diet rich in fruit and vegetables along with plenty of exercise and not smoking keeps our heart healthy, which helps to protect our brain from diseases that lead to dementia," says Susan.

And the more colourful the fruit and vegetables you consume, the better, according to scientists from Harvard University. In a study of more than 77,000 middle-aged men and women, the researchers found that those with the highest intake of flavonoids – powerful antioxidant plant compounds – were 19% less likely to report difficulties with memory and thinking as they aged. Blueberries, strawberries, peppers and spinach were found to be particularly beneficial, but the overriding message was to aim for as wide a variety of fruit and veg as possible to maintain optimum cognitive health. »

**'AIM FOR AS WIDE
A VARIETY OF FRUIT
AND VEG AS POSSIBLE
FOR OPTIMUM
COGNITIVE HEALTH'**

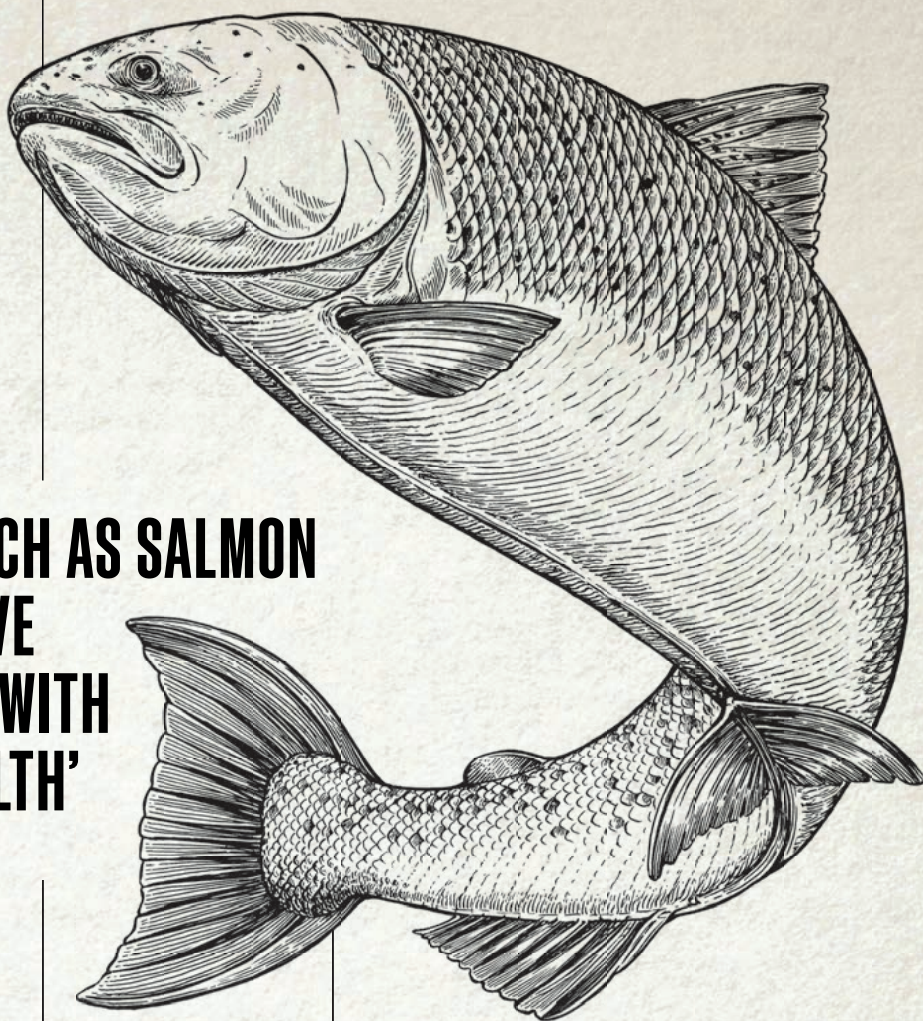
'TUNA AND OILY FISH SUCH AS SALMON AND MACKEREL HAVE LONG BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH BETTER BRAIN HEALTH'

The MIND diet specifically points to berries as having cognitive benefits. A US study published in the *Annals of Neurology* looked at the diets of more than 16,000 people aged 70 and older for more than 15 years, concluding that those who ate the most blueberries and strawberries delayed cognitive ageing by up to two and a half years.

Another positive change is to eat more tuna and oily fish – such as salmon and mackerel – which are associated with better brain health and a reduced risk of dementia. A study published in the journal *Neurology*, which followed 2,233 people aged 65 and older, found that eating oily fish more than twice a week reduced dementia risk by 28% compared to those who ate it less than once a month. The omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish play important roles in brain function and development. It is worth noting, however, that there is no compelling evidence that omega 3 supplements improve brain function in people with dementia.

Adding nuts, seeds, wholegrains and legumes such as lentils and soybeans to your diet can benefit both your heart and brain health. In one 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. In a 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.

Eating well goes hand in hand with being physically active. “Staying active helps our hearts



5

FOODS TO LIMIT

The MIND diet recommends limiting the following five foods:

BUTTER/ MARGARINE

Less than 1 tbsp per day

CONFECTIONERY & PASTRIES

No more than 5 servings per week

RED MEAT

No more than 4 servings per week

CHEESE

Less than 1 serving per week

FRIED/FAST FOODS

Less than 1 serving per week

pump blood around our bodies, delivering a vital supply of oxygen and nutrients to the brain,” explains Susan. “Research suggests that, because of this, the brains of people who exercise regularly tend to be healthier, with less damage to their small blood vessels.” A mix of aerobic exercise and strength training seems most effective. A study published in *JAMA Neurology* involving more than 78,000 people in the UK found that those who walked 3,800 steps a day had a 25% lower risk of developing dementia. Those who walked 9,800 steps had a 50% lower risk.

Staying mentally and socially active also makes a difference. A study in *PLOS Medicine* found that being more sociable with family and friends in midlife is linked to better cognitive performance and a lower risk of dementia later in life. While there is no magic bullet when it comes to staving off dementia, choosing to eat a healthy diet rich in fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes, avoiding ultra-processed foods as much as possible and keeping alcohol intake moderate (within the recommended limit of 14 units a week) can all add up to a healthier brain.

Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist specialising in sports nutrition. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook and The Runner's Cookbook.

Heart-y eating

Six in 10 people in England have high cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease and strokes. The good news is that a plant-based diet can help lower your levels. According to a comprehensive review of 30 studies recently published in the *European Heart Journal*, vegetarian and vegan diets were associated with 10% lower 'bad' cholesterol levels and 7% lower levels of total cholesterol. It's worth noting that these benefits only come with plant-based diets based on fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes, not those heavy on refined carbs and ultra-processed foods.



ASK THE NUTRITIONIST

Joanne has an MSc and a PhD in nutrition and has been a Partner for 14 years

Q I love coffee but worry that I should keep an eye on how much I drink. What is your advice?

A Coffee is incredibly popular, yet opinions on its health benefits vary. For instance, recent research suggests that our ability to concentrate (and our general health) benefits from us staying hydrated throughout the day. Moderate coffee consumption (two to three cups a day) won't adversely affect hydration levels – in fact, it contributes to the recommended six to eight glasses of fluid we should aim to drink each day.

Coffee has also been associated with a reduction in the incidence of cardiovascular disease, although the reasons for this are as yet unclear, pending further research. Perhaps surprisingly, coffee contains fibre too – in the form of compounds called phenolics. These impart some of coffee's bitterness and are known to be powerful antioxidants. However, these phenolics are poorly absorbed by our bodies and are therefore unlikely to have much of a beneficial antioxidative effect.

One of the best-known constituents of coffee, of course, is caffeine, a naturally occurring stimulant that boosts alertness, improves attention and aids energy release, especially during exercise. But it's important to acknowledge the possible negative side effects of caffeine too, which include making it harder to fall asleep. To avoid this, it's recommended to have your last coffee at least six hours before bed.

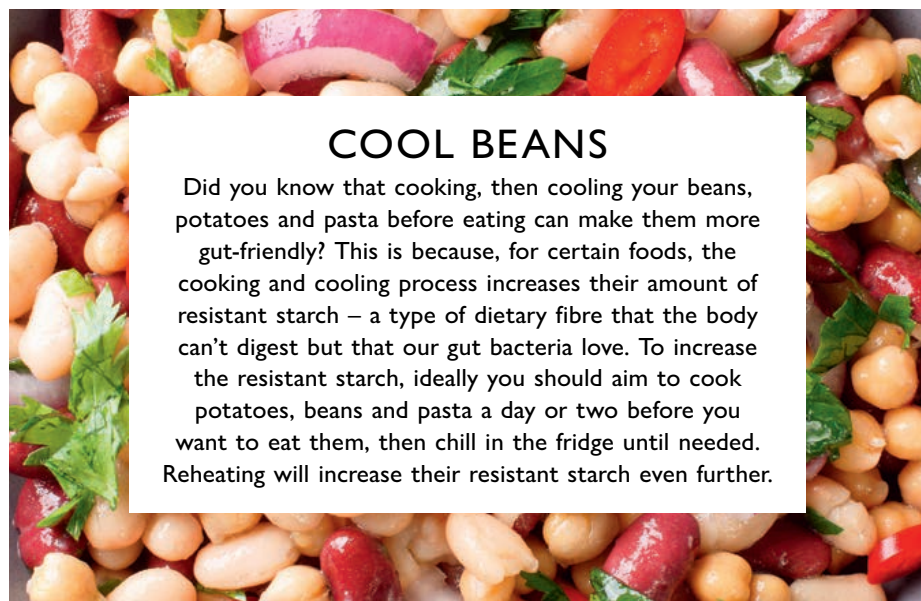
Overall, many studies seem to show that coffee can be healthy when consumed in moderation.

Do you have a question about healthy eating and nutrition? Email Joanne at waitrose.food@dentsu.com with the subject line 'Ask the nutritionist'.

WORDS ANITA BEAN INTERVIEW FAYE HARDY PHOTOGRAPHS ALAMY

Better health

Wellbeing tips and trends, plus your questions answered by Waitrose nutritionist *Joanne Lunn*



COOL BEANS

Did you know that cooking, then cooling your beans, potatoes and pasta before eating can make them more gut-friendly? This is because, for certain foods, the cooking and cooling process increases their amount of resistant starch – a type of dietary fibre that the body can't digest but that our gut bacteria love. To increase the resistant starch, ideally you should aim to cook potatoes, beans and pasta a day or two before you want to eat them, then chill in the fridge until needed. Reheating will increase their resistant starch even further.

STEP IT UP Eating a Mediterranean-style diet can have a dramatic effect on your cardiovascular health – the equivalent of taking 4,000 more steps a day, according to a study of 2,380 adults in the *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology*.