

Six things your brain needs TO REMAIN HEALTHY

Your food choices affect more than just your blood sugar or your heart health **By Rosie Schwartz, RD**

While it is well known that healthy food choices can have a major impact on your physical health, especially if you have diabetes, many are unaware that how you eat can also affect mental health. Your emotional state and how you function can affect your blood sugar control, too.

1 AVOID STRESS: THE FOOD-MOOD CONNECTION

A recent diabetes diagnosis, or worrying about managing your blood sugar (glucose), can lead to an increased level of stress. Alison Lieberman, a registered dietitian at Lakeridge Health Diabetes Education Program in southern Ontario, says, “Stress can lead to poor [blood sugar] control both directly and indirectly. When the body is under stress—either physical (illness) or mental (anxiety)—blood sugars often rise due to the release of stress hormones.” Feeling overwhelmed also has indirect effects, she adds: “When under stress, people are less likely to check their blood sugars as regularly, watch their diet as strictly, or follow an exercise plan.”

2 EAT REGULARLY TO AVOID LOW BLOOD SUGAR

Low blood sugar, or hypoglycemia, can lead to irritability and fatigue. Eating regularly is key to avoiding this, for those with type 1 or type 2 diabetes. Choosing the right kinds of carbohydrates also helps to keep blood sugars more stable. Lieberman says, “Eat complex carbohydrates, including high-fibre foods such as whole grains, pulses [dried peas and beans], and starchy vegetables. Limit refined carbohydrates, such as white breads, sweets, and pop. Complex carbohydrates take longer to digest, creating a more sustained fuel supply to the brain.”

3 CHOOSE BALANCED MEALS

Including protein-rich foods such as fish, pulses, soy, poultry, dairy products, meat, and nuts at meals may not only help to keep blood sugars more stable but also provide specific nutrients (such as vitamins and healthy fats) for the brain.

4 GO FOR GOOD FATS

Unsaturated fats, especially omega-3 fatty acids, are essential for good health. These fats are vital for proper brain function and have also been shown to protect against depression. Omega-3 fats are found in cold-water fish, such as salmon, sardines, and mackerel, as well as in plant sources, such as flaxseed, canola oil, walnuts, and hemp seeds.

5 GET YOUR VITAMIN B12

This vitamin is vital for a healthy brain, as it is a key nutrient for maintaining nerve cells. If you are a vegetarian, taking a supplement can be beneficial, since B12 is only found in animal products. Research shows that having lower amounts of stomach acids (one result of aging) may lead to poor vitamin B12 absorption, so if you are over the age of 50 (or if you are younger and regularly take medications that reduce your stomach acids), consider a B12 supplement.

6 STAY HYDRATED

Being dehydrated can leave you feeling tired. Make water your drink of choice; regular pop and fruit juices can raise blood sugar levels.

Did you know?

Starchy foods, such as whole-grain breads and cereals, rice, noodles, or potatoes, are broken down into glucose, which your body needs for energy. To read more from “Basic Meal Planning,” visit diabetes.ca/basics.



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These three brain-healthy recipes are not only nutritious but delicious, too!



Here is a speedy recipe from my book, *The Enlightened Eater's Whole Foods Guide* (Viking), that offers the right balance to start off your day and keep your blood sugar more stable. It does not taste like typical breakfast food, is portable, and is a snap to make. Double, triple, or quadruple this recipe if you like—everyone will want a bite.

APPLE CHEESE QUESADILLA

1 flour tortilla (8-inch/20 cm), preferably whole wheat
Vegetable oil cooking spray
1 tsp (5 mL) honey mustard
½ cup (125 mL) shredded reduced-fat cheddar cheese
Half apple, cut into quarters, cored and sliced

Spray tortilla with vegetable oil cooking spray; place sprayed-side down in a large non-stick skillet. Spread honey mustard on half of the tortilla. Layer remaining ingredients using ¼ cup (50 mL) cheese, then apple slices and finishing with remaining cheese. Fold other half over and press firmly to spread filling evenly to edges. Place skillet over medium-high heat; cook for 3 to 4 minutes or until golden. Carefully turn quesadilla over and cook for another 3 to 4 minutes.

Makes 1 serving

Nutritional breakdown per serving: 34 g carbohydrate, 14 g protein, 7 g total fat, 3 g saturated fat, 4 g fibre, 299 mg sodium, 229 calories

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This recipe from my book, *The Enlightened Eater's Whole Foods Guide* (Viking), offers an easy way to include pulses in your meal plan. The addition of the caramelized onions and cumin just before serving provides a fabulous flavour boost. And freezing the leftover soup does not diminish the onion hit.

SPLIT PEA SOUP WITH CUMIN AND CARAMELIZED ONIONS

2 tbsp (25 mL) extra virgin olive oil, divided
3 cloves garlic, minced
2 carrots, chopped
2 celery stalks, chopped
3 cups (750 mL) dried split peas, picked over and rinsed
10 cups (2.5 L) low-sodium vegetable or chicken broth
1 bay leaf
3 cups (750 mL) chopped onion
¾ tsp (4 mL) cumin seed
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Heat 1 tbsp (15 mL) oil in a large saucepan over medium-low heat. Add garlic, carrots, and celery; sauté until soft, or for about 10 minutes. Add split peas, broth, and bay leaf to saucepan; bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, until peas are tender, stirring occasionally, about 55 to 60 minutes. Discard bay leaf.

While soup is cooking, prepare onions. In a heavy skillet, heat remaining 1 tbsp olive oil; sauté onion and cumin seed in oil over medium-high heat until onions begin to brown. Reduce heat to medium; continue to cook, stirring, until onions are golden brown, or for about 10 to 15 minutes.

In a blender, purée soup in batches until just smooth; transfer to a bowl. Stir in onion mixture, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.

Makes 8-10 servings

Nutritional breakdown per each of 10 servings: 44 g carbohydrate, 17 g protein, 4 g total fat, 1 g saturated fat, 17 g fibre, 131 mg sodium, 268 calories

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Adapted from *lentils.ca*, this recipe includes an assortment of ingredients for your brain, including omega-3 fat-rich fish and canola oil, as well as pulses and vegetables.

SEARED SALMON WITH SAUTÉED FENNEL, LENTILS, & DILL

2 tbsp (25 mL) canola oil, divided
½ cup (125 mL) thinly sliced red onion
½ cup (125 mL) thinly sliced fennel (reserve fronds)
½ cup (125 mL) halved cherry tomatoes
½ cup (125 mL) cooked green lentils
1 tbsp (15 mL) lemon juice and zest
1 tbsp (15 mL) chopped fresh dill (reserve some for garnish)
6 salmon fillets (6 oz./170 g), deboned, skin removed
Salt and ground black pepper

Heat 1 tbsp (15 mL) oil in a medium pan; sauté onions and fennel until soft and slightly golden. Stir in tomatoes and lentils, and continue to cook for another 2 to 3 minutes or until hot. Stir in lemon juice, zest, and dill. Remove from stove and reserve.

Season each side of the salmon fillets with salt and pepper. Heat a large sauté pan on medium-high heat. Once pan is hot, add remaining 1 tbsp oil; lay fillets down and cook for 3 to 4 minutes per side or until desired doneness. Try to achieve a nice golden sear for best flavour and presentation. Remove salmon from pan once cooked.

Lay fillets down on a platter or plate, and top with prepared fennel and lentil mixture. Garnish with fresh dill and fennel fronds, and serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings

Nutritional breakdown per serving: 6 g carbohydrate, 42 g protein, 12 g total fat, 2 g saturated fat, 2 g fibre, 200 mg sodium, 310 calories