

Healthy Buffs: 4 tips to improve focus

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Credit: University of Colorado at Boulder

With fall break behind us and the holiday season ahead, these last few weeks of the semester can feel overwhelming. Having a plan for your health and wellness can help you stay focused and finish strong. CU Boulder Today interviewed the registered dietitians at Wardenburg, Kathleen Farrell and Jane Reagan, to find out where to start.

Brain food

The food you eat plays a big part in how focused you are when you're in class, working or studying. Whether it's a full meal or a snack, knowing which nutrients are important can help you with planning. Here are some

things you can do to fuel your body to help stay energized and focused.

Complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, bread and oatmeal have more fiber and take longer to break down. This helps regulate your blood sugar and optimizes your energy throughout the day. Getting enough [complex carbohydrates](#) is key to maintaining your ability to study and perform effectively.

In addition to carbohydrates, you need an adequate amount of proteins and fats. These keep you going throughout the day, as they take longer to digest than carbs. Including healthy, monosaturated fats in your diet, such as fats from nuts, seeds and avocados, are good for your [brain](#)—if you've ever heard these are "brain foods," it's because of the healthy fats they provide! In fact, 70 percent of our nervous systems, including the brain, are comprised of fat.

Proteins play a role in brain alertness, as well. Proteins are made up of amino acids, some of which can help neurotransmitters transmit signals in your brain. Dopamine is a key neurotransmitter that helps you focus, and proteins play a big role in how it's made up. A general rule is to aim for 20 to 25g of protein at every meal for optimal brain function.

Hydrate

Our bodies are made up of 70 percent water, making hydration important for a number of reasons. Protecting your joints, maintaining organ function, transporting oxygen to cells and sustaining body temperature are just a few of the things water is essential for, so dehydration can have a big effect on your energy and ability to focus.

An easy rule of thumb is to drink half of your body weight in ounces of water each day (for a 150-pound person, this means 75 ounces of water). Having a hard time drinking enough water? Try putting a lemon or other

fruit slice in it to change the flavor up a bit.

Sleep

When we get busy, sleep is usually the first thing to go in order to get more things done. Getting [adequate sleep](#) (7–9 hours) each night can help you stay focused and attentive throughout the day and help retain information. Try having a consistent sleep schedule each night, even on weekends, to get your body into a routine.

If getting to bed and waking up at the same times feel difficult, aim to keep it all within one-hour windows of when you want to get to bed or wake up by. While it may take a few nights for your body to settle into the pattern, you'll start feeling more rested and able to focus once you make it a habit.

Sleep really is the key: Studies show that getting a full night's sleep after a study session instead of stretching it into an all-nighter helps the brain retain and recall more of what you study.

Plan ahead

When we're getting ready for stressful times, having a good plan for overall health and wellness can help prevent crashing and burning. Starting with small changes, such as packing a nutritious mid-day snack, can make the bigger changes feel more within reach.

If possible, plan your meals and snacks so that you don't go longer than four hours without eating. This will ensure your [blood sugar](#) is regulated throughout the day and you don't experience those highs and lows that can make it harder to focus, let alone stay awake. Concentrate on nutrient-dense snacks with carbohydrates, fat and protein, and minimize

added sugars.

Work on incorporating consistent healthy habits into all your routines, such as stretching for a few minutes before bed or drinking a full glass of water with every meal. Or set reminders on your phone to get up and walk around for a few minutes for every hour of studying—getting the blood flowing and breaking up chunks of work helps sustain you and make your brain more effective at remembering.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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