

On Nutrition: Food for thoughts

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I forgot that June was Brain Health Awareness Month. And then I stumbled over several interesting research articles that say it's never to late—or early—to learn.

According to Dr. Louise Dye, a nutrition and behavior professor at the University of Leeds in England, our brains go through major changes in our lifetime, especially when we are very young and very old.

Children's brains increase in [mental capacity](#) as they grow and learn, says Dye. In our middle years, our goal is to maintain our [brain function](#) with good habits such as adequate sleep and dealing well with stress.

After the age of 50, a scary condition called "[age-related cognitive decline](#)" can occur, said Dye in a podcast sponsored by the Cranberry Institute (cranberryinstitute.org). "But it doesn't happen to everyone," she adds.

OK, I'm in. What can we do to preserve our brains for a lifetime?

Much of the answer lies in our lifestyle, says Dye. That includes our diet and [physical activity](#), as well as how we deal with stress.

Tea, for example, contains [natural substances](#) called polyphenols that help us relax. In fact, more than 8,000 types of polyphenols in plant-based foods have been identified, each with specific health benefits.

Anthocyanins—the polyphenols that give color to fruits and vegetables—have been found to preserve verbal memory, says Dye. Basically that means they help us remember what we are doing. These substances in blueberries, strawberries, cranberries and grape juice also help the [brain](#) with decision-making tasks. "Children who eat these foods can concentrate better," she adds. "Science proves it."

Resveratrol, another type of polyphenol found in peanuts, cocoa, red and purple grapes and [grape juice](#), is a [potent antioxidant](#) that may protect against inflammation and certain types of dementia, according to some studies.

Of course, says Dye, there is no cure for dementia. But there is a lot we can do to help prevent it. People who are obese, for example, might be more likely to develop a decline in mental function as they age, she says.

And people with Type 2 diabetes are more likely to develop a condition called "vascular dementia."

Her recommendations? "Eat a rainbow. Lots of colorful fruits and vegetables can help preserve memory. Exercise. It helps curb insulin resistance that can lead to diabetes. And bring down your weight if you are overweight."

Do "cognitive exercises" to keep your brain engaged. "Socialize. Learn new things. Be engaged in your environment and with other people," she continues. "All of these play a role (in brain health)."

Science is proving that what we ingest really does matter.

"It's all about balance, everything in moderation and nothing in excess. Add variety to your food and variety in your life," says Dye.

I think this is something I want to remember.

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