

## *How Healthy is Your Brain!*

The brain is an energy-intensive organ, using around 20 percent of the body's calories, so it needs plenty of good fuel to maintain concentration throughout the day. The brain requires certain nutrients to stay healthy. Omega-3 fatty acids, for example, help build and repair brain cells, and antioxidants reduce cellular stress and inflammation, which are linked to brain aging and neurodegenerative disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease.

Consider following a Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes plant-based foods, whole grains, fish and healthy fats, such as olive oil. It incorporates less red meat and salt than a typical American diet. Studies show people who closely follow a Mediterranean diet are less likely to have Alzheimer's disease than people who don't follow the diet. Further research is needed to determine which parts of the diet help the brain function the most. However, we know that omega fatty acids, antioxidants (flavonoids, anthocyanin, caffeic acid, catechin, and quercetin), vitamins E, C and B; and healthy unsaturated fats are all vital for your cells to function correctly. These nutrients show a correlation to decrease your risk of coronary artery disease, increase mental focus and slow cognitive decline in older adults.

Specific foods that have been studied to show support for brain health include:

- Omega 3 Fatty Acids: Oily fish such as salmon, tuna, nuts, seeds (sunflower, chia and flaxseed)
- Antioxidants: Flavonoids in dark chocolate, berries, broccoli, kale, soy products
- Vitamin E: nuts, seeds, whole grains.
- Vitamin B in eggs
- Healthy unsaturated fats: avocado, soybeans, peanuts, olive oil, fish, nuts, seeds

Beyond adjusting the diet, a person can optimize their brain function by:

- **Exercise** has many known benefits, and regular physical activity also benefits the brain. Multiple research studies show that physical active people are less likely to experience a decline in their mental function and have a lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. These benefits result from increased blood flow to your brain during exercise.
- **Sleep** plays an important role in your brain health. Some theories state that sleep helps clear abnormal proteins in your brain and consolidates memories, which boosts your overall memory and brain health.

- Your brain is similar to a muscle — **you need to use it or lose it**. There are many things that you can do to keep your brain in shape, such as doing crossword puzzles or Sudoku, reading, playing cards or putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Consider it as cross training your brain. Incorporate different types of activities to increase effectiveness.
- **Social interaction** helps ward off depression and stress, which can contribute to memory loss. Look for opportunities to connect with loved ones, friends and others, especially if you live alone. Research links solitary confinement to brain atrophy, so remaining socially active may have the opposite effect and strengthen the health of your brain.
- The health of your arteries and veins is important to your **heart health** but it is also critical for brain health. Get your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol checked regularly and take steps to keep your numbers within a normal range.

Eating a brain-boosting diet and daily steps to optimize brain function will provide many benefits for the entire body.

### **Chia Seed Pudding- 1serving**

½ cup milk (dairy, almond or oat milk)

2 tablespoons chia seeds

½ teaspoon maple syrup, honey- optional

⅛ teaspoon cinnamon- optional

Suggested toppings: fruit of choice, nuts, granola, coconut flakes

### **Instructions**

In a lidded jar, combine milk, chia seeds, maple syrup or honey, and cinnamon. Cover and shake to combine. Chill for a few hours, then give it a good stir to loosen any clumps. Continue chilling for 8 hours or overnight for the pudding to set. Serve with toppings of choice.

References: [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/32044](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/32044), <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/5-tips-to-keep-your-brain-healthy>, [www.health.harvard.edu/nutrition/chia-seed-benefits-what-you-need-know](http://www.health.harvard.edu/nutrition/chia-seed-benefits-what-you-need-know)

Written by Laurie Zirilli, registered dietitian, contract RD for Oneida County Office for the Aging. Oneida County OFA provides nutrition counseling and education for the aging. Questions about services and programs for older adults and caregivers, including the Senior Nutrition Program, should call Oneida County Office for the Aging at (315) 798-5456.