Your Health: Simple steps boost brain function, reduce alzheimer's risk

by Rallie_McAllister

One of the most unsettling realities associated with growing older is the loss of mental sharpness. It's bad enough that you have to wear reading glasses, but constantly forgetting where you left them is even worse.

With age, everyone has occasional lapses in memory. It's not uncommon to misplace your glasses and car keys, or to forget the names of people you rarely see.

Forgetting the names of family members and familiar objects, on the other hand, isn't a normal part of aging. In some cases, increasing forgetfulness may be an indication of Alzheimer's disease, a debilitating condition that can rob people of the ability to remember, reason and learn.

Alzheimer's disease doesn't occur overnight. It is typically preceded by mild cognitive impairment â€” a stage between normal age-related changes and dementia that is marked by minor memory loss and bouts of confusion.

While prescription drugs are available to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's, these medications don't address the underlying causes of the disease. The good news is that by making a few changes in your diet, you may be able to delay or even prevent the onset of mild cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's disease.

The results of a recent study published in Archives of Neurology suggest that following the Mediterranean diet can significantly reduce the risk of cognitive impairment. The Mediterranean diet includes high intakes of fish, vegetables and unsaturated fatty acids, along with moderate alcohol consumption and low intakes of dairy products, meat and saturated fats.

In a study conducted at Columbia University Medical Center in New York, researchers analyzed the eating habits and brain function of nearly 1,400 older adults. Over a four-year period, individuals with normal brain function who followed the Mediterranean diet were found to have a 28 percent lower risk of developing mild cognitive impairment compared to those consuming a typical American diet.

Among individuals with mild cognitive impairment at the beginning of the study, those who adhered to the Mediterranean diet had a 48 percent lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease compared to those whose diets were less wholesome.

If you're not ready to completely overhaul your diet, making a few simple changes in your eating habits can

have a big impact on brain health and performance. Including more fish in your diet is an excellent place to start.

Weekly consumption of fish has been shown to slow the rate of cognitive decline and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease among older adults. If you're not a fan of finned foods, regular consumption of fish-oil capsules appears to provide similar benefits.

Eating curried foods can boost brainpower and reduce the risk of dementia, thanks to a chemical compound in turmeric, the spice used to flavor curry powders.

In a study of more than a thousand elderly Asian adults, researchers in Singapore found that individuals who ate curried foods often or even occasionally scored significantly higher on tests of cognitive function than those who rarely or never ate the spice. In India, where curry consumption is commonplace, the prevalence of Alzheimer's disease is among the lowest in the world.

Regular consumption of dark chocolate, wine and tea has been shown to enhance brain performance. In a study of more than 2,000 older adults, researchers from Oxford University in England found that those who habitually consumed chocolate, wine or tea scored significantly higher on tests of cognitive performance than those who did not.

Italian researchers recently reported that older adults with mild cognitive impairment who drank one glass of wine daily developed dementia at an 85 percent slower rate compared to those who never imbibed. In addition to drinking wine, moderate coffee consumption appears to offer a number of important perks for the brain.

Researchers at the University of North Dakota reported that a daily jolt of java can enhance brain function and help protect against Alzheimer's disease. Compared to women who didn't drink coffee, female coffee drinkers were nearly 70 percent less likely to have memory decline at age 80 or older.

If you don't enjoy wine, tea or coffee, pomegranate juice may be the ideal brain-boosting beverage for you. Scientists at Loma Linda University in California found that drinking a glass of the juice each day helps slow the development and progression of Alzheimer's disease.

Mild cognitive impairment with aging isn't inevitable, and Alzheimer's disease may be entirely preventable. Making a few simple changes in your diet can help keep your brain healthy and your mind sharp for years to come.

Rallie McAllister is a board-certified family physician, speaker and the author of several books, including "Healthy Lunchbox: The Working Mom's Guide to Keeping You and Your Kids Trim."

Copyright 2009 Creators Syndicate Inc.

Your Health: Simple steps boost brain function, reduce alzheimer's risk by Rallie_McAllister