

Top 10 Brain-Boosting Foods

By Andy Harnsberger

As artists, we are constantly striving to find things that will give us an edge and improve our performance. We work on a variety of practice techniques, attend workshops, and read books or articles that will give us insight into the mind of the performing musician. But we tend to ignore some of the most basic and essential things that will help us excel. One of those things is nutrition. How can nutrition help us succeed as musicians?

Just as the foods we eat affect our bodies, they greatly impact the way our brains age and function. An abundance, or lack, of certain nutrients can affect everything from our mood to our memory. By eating foods that are rich in essential vitamins and nutrients, we can make sure our brains work optimally at every stage of life.

WHY THESE FOODS WORK

The foods in this list work because they contain one or more of the “Big Three” nutrients that support our brain’s function. Each of these nutrients works in different ways, but the end result is the same: optimal brain power. While some foods on this list contain additional minerals and nutrients that have also been proven to boost the brain’s power; there are three main nutrients to consider: Omega-3 fatty acids, Antioxidants, and B vitamins.

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

Omega-3 fatty acids have been found to promote efficient “communication” between our brain cells, reduce inflammation, and fight memory loss. Our bodies cannot manufacture Omega-3 fatty acids, so it is important that we incorporate them into our diet.

ANTIOXIDANTS

Antioxidants, such as vitamin C and selenium, protect our cells from oxidative stress. Two antioxidants are particularly beneficial to our brain’s health: Flavonoids and vitamin E.

Flavonoids are found in colorful fruits and vegetables. They reduce inflammation and increase the number of connections between neurons.

Vitamin E is a powerful nutrient that prevents cell damage throughout the body.

B VITAMINS

B vitamins (especially B12) help metabolize the proteins we eat. Vitamin B6 reduces the risk of developing cognitive impairment, increases blood flow to brain cells, and helps reduce inflammation. Folic

acid (B9) is critical for brain function and plays an important role in mental health.

The following are examples of my personal favorite “brain-boosting foods.” I chose these particular foods not only because they contain an abundant supply of specific nutrients that are known to support brain health, but also because they are great-tasting and easy to incorporate into your daily nutritional intake.

1. CURRY: TURMERIC



Turmeric is the spice that gives curry its color, and it can actually help the body regenerate new brain cells. Curcumin, which is a chemical within turmeric, stimulates this new cell growth, boosts memory, and reduces inflammation within the brain and throughout the body. Turmeric is a good source of vitamin B6 and is a powerful antioxidant that counteracts stress in the body.

How to use: You should be able to find turmeric at the grocery store or in health stores. It is very easy to add into your diet. Add a pinch to your scrambled eggs, rice dishes, and vegetables. You can also add it to hot tea for a wonderful flavor. If you are having trouble incorporating it into your diet, try taking it in capsule form.

2. CELERY



In addition to antioxidants like vitamin C and flavonoids, celery contains at least a dozen other types

of antioxidant nutrients that all help fight the free radicals that can cause damage to the brain. Celery is also one of the richest sources of luteolin, a plant compound that reduces inflammation in the brain, which is believed to be a primary cause of neuro-degeneration. Luteolin can prevent the onset of degenerative diseases in the brain. Just one 3.5 ounce serving of celery also contains 74 mcg of vitamin B6, 35 mcg of B9 (folic acid), 3 mcg of vitamin C, and 270 mcg of vitamin E.

How to use: There are many ways to add celery into your diet; one of my favorites is to eat it with some almond butter.

3. BROCCOLI AND CAULIFLOWER



Maybe you turned your nose up at these vegetables when you were a kid, but hopefully you enjoy them now. Broccoli and cauliflower both contain choline, a B vitamin known for its role in brain development and for boosting the brain’s cognitive function, meaning it can improve our ability to memorize and learn. They also contain high levels of the super antioxidant vitamin C and flavonoids that are necessary for superior brain function. Broccoli also offers beneficial amounts of vitamin E, while cauliflower provides vitamins B9, B6, B3, B2, and B1. Perhaps even more amazing is that broccoli is also high in compounds that can stop the decline of acetylcholine, which is necessary for the central nervous system to perform properly.

How to use: One of the most popular ways to eat these vegetables is to steam them, but be careful! Steaming them for too long robs them of some of their nutritional value. They are also good sautéed in a pan raw, or with some extra-virgin olive oil. Give these two another shot as an adult!

4. WALNUTS

By now you know Omega-3 fatty acids are incred-



ibly important for brain health. Walnuts not only taste great, but they are very beneficial to your brain and entire nervous system. They are a rich source of those hard-to-find Omega-3 fatty acids as well as vitamin E, which has been shown to protect the brain from free radicals.

How to use: These are extremely easy to add to your diet. Just put a handful in your oatmeal or salads. You can blend them up in a smoothie or put them in your pancakes!

5. BLUEBERRIES



If you're tired of hearing about the health benefits of blueberries, apologies, but here's another one. A diet high in blueberries will promote faster learning, sharper thinking, and improved memory retention. The antioxidant power of blueberries clears free radicals and reduces neurodegenerative oxidative stress. How to use: Eat them in the morning with breakfast or as a snack throughout the day.

6. FLAX SEEDS



These little seeds are a fantastic source of beneficial Omega-3 fatty acids. Just two tablespoons of flax seeds give you a whopping 133 percent of the daily recommended value of Omega-3s. You'll also get beneficial B1 and selenium, which is important for cell protection and reducing inflammation. How to use: You can add them into your diet by



sprinkling them on cereal or yogurt, or blending them up in a smoothie.

7. RED MEAT

There are many reasons not to overdo red meat, but when it comes to brain health, the high vitamin B12 content in beef and lamb tips the scales. An overall energy-booster, vitamin B12 is vital to healthy brain function, to the point that B12 deficiency causes nerve and brain damage. One of the trendiest supplements around, vitamin B12—also known as cobalamin—can be found in office cupboards and backstage in rock stars' green rooms. I personally like a good dose of B12 right before a recital or concert. Beef liver has the highest B12 content of all, but liver tends not to be a dinnertime staple—at least not in my house.

How to use: Try limiting red meat to once a week. If you have a big event coming up, eat it closer to that date.

8. FATTY FISH



You may have heard this already, but seafood like salmon, albacore tuna, mackerel, and sardines are packed with Omega-3 fatty acids, powerful and versatile nutrients that are essential for a healthy mind. About 40 percent of the fatty acids in brain cell membranes are DHA, one of the main Omega-3s in fish oil. Experts believe it is probably necessary for transmitting signals between brain cells.

Researchers at Tufts University found that people who ate fish three times a week and had the highest levels of DHA in their blood slashed their risk of Alzheimer's disease and Dementia by 39 percent. How to use: Eat fatty fish twice a week, but limit albacore tuna to no more than six ounces a week to minimize mercury exposure.

9. DARK CHOCOLATE

The darker the better, but at least 70 percent cocoa. Not only is dark chocolate delicious, it also



helps to boost your brain power. It is a rich source of iron, fiber, and magnesium, but most importantly contains flavonols, which improve blood flow to the brain and aid cognitive function and memory.

Dark chocolate is also an especially powerful antioxidant. In fact, just one serving of dark chocolate contains more antioxidants than even blueberries. How to use: Eat it frequently as part of a healthy total calorie intake.

10. COFFEE



A jolt of caffeine may not just offer a quick boost in our mental clarity and alertness, but may also play a role in long-term thinking skills. Caffeine is a brain stimulant, but beyond that, it also has the ability to block receptors for a chemical called adenosine. Adenosine prevents the release of excitatory brain chemicals. Long story short, caffeine keeps these chemicals out of the way so your brain-sparking chemicals can flow freely, improving your mental decline. But take it easy! You only need one or two cups per day.

CONCLUSION

There you have it, my top-10 foods that are not only delicious and readily available, but can actually help boost your brain power! This is not a prescription for a diet plan, but suggestions that people could incorporate into their current lifestyle. It is also by no means a complete, comprehensive list of foods with brain power. If some of these foods just do not work for you, here are some other foods you can try to incorporate into your diet for brain-boosting power: beets, pumpkin seeds, spinach, bee pollen, coconut oil, tomatoes, leafy greens, almond butter, green tea, legumes, sunflower seeds, garlic, extra-virgin olive oil, eggs (eat the yolks!), brown rice, sweet potatoes, asparagus, bananas, oysters, Brussels sprouts, pecans, strawberries, blackberries, eggplant, oatmeal.

Seek professional advice before beginning any

diet program. Feel free to contact the author at andy-harnsberger1@aol.com for additional information or questions.

RESOURCES

Omega-3 Fatty Acids

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.gov/pubmed/24453077>

Antioxidants

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.gov/pubmed/24957018>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.gov/pubmed/19685255>

B Vitamins

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3137939>

Foods

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<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/your-brain-on-food>

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<http://www.worldhealth.net/anti-aging-tips/75/brain/>

Andy Harnsberger is Associate Professor of Percussion Studies at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, and is a Certified Nutritionist specializing in nutrition for athletes. He has appeared at many PAS Days of Percussion[®] and has been a featured solo artist at PASIC. Harnsberger earned his Doctorate of Musical Arts degree in Performance and Literature at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he also received the prestigious Performer's Certificate, and he is a Certified Sports Nutrition Consultant through American Fitness Professionals and Associates. **PN**