



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Mind Matters of the Heart to Keep the Brain Healthy

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Because brain health is closely related to heart health, today we take a close look at how to keep your heart happy.***

When people are faced with important decisions about love or the future or which team to pick in the Super Bowl, they often have to choose whether to follow their head (reason and logic) or their heart (emotion). It's as if mind and body are wholly separate organisms.

But as we learned long ago, the head, or more specifically the brain, and the heart are inextricably linked. The literal connection between the two is the vascular system – the arteries and veins that carry blood, and nutrients from the heart to the brain and back. That steady flow of oxygen-rich blood nourishes our brain cells and protects our brain functions. Diseases that constrict the blood vessels or slow the flow of blood to our brain can increase the risk of brain illness and lead to stroke and cognitive impairment.

Or, as the English physician Thomas Sydenham put it more than 300 years ago, “A man is as old as his arteries.”

Interestingly, research also is uncovering links between Alzheimer's disease and heart health, according to a [Harvard Health report](#). Alzheimer's occurs because of protein tangles in the brain, but the same risk factors – obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes – that cause heart disease, have also been found to produce a higher risk for brain illness, including strokes vascular dementias, and Alzheimer's.

The connection between head and heart works both ways. Poor brain health can lead to higher risk of heart disease. A simple explanation is that brain illnesses like depression can result in behavioral changes, such as less regular exercise and increased alcohol consumption, that can cause heart health to deteriorate. But other brain health issues – reactions to stress, traumatic

childhood experiences, social isolation, and anger – carry direct risk factors for cardiac events.

So, during this month, let's remember the heart-head connection and take steps to protect our brain health, promote brain performance, and fight brain illness across the lifespan.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

The pillars of a heart-healthy lifestyle are well-known: Get 150 minutes of activity per week; eat a brain healthy diet and avoid sugars, sodium, and saturated fats; avoid smoking; and limit alcohol use. Here, courtesy of the BHI faculty, are some numbers to know to check up on your heart health and risk factors for brain illness:

- **Blood Pressure: Less than 120/80 mm hg.** High blood pressure increases damage to the blood vessels and encourages plaque build-up, leading to an increased risk of heart attack. Eat a diet rich in potassium and low in sodium to improve the numbers.
- **LDL Cholesterol: Less than 100 mg/dl.** Excess LDL particles combine with white blood cells along artery walls to form fatty foam cells. That leads to atherosclerosis. Limit saturated fats (meat, dairy, eggs) and replace with unsaturated fats (nuts, seeds, vegetable oils).
- **Triglycerides. Less than 150 mg/dl.** Triglycerides are the most common fat in the bloodstream. Excess calories, sugar and alcohol are stored in fat cells. High triglyceride levels are linked to increased risk of heart attack and stroke. Limit foods high in unhealthy fats and/or sugar and eat foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids (fish).
- **Blood sugar. Less than 100 mg/dl.** High blood sugar creates several problems in the arteries. It damages the vessel walls and encourages LDL cholesterol to oxidize. Avoid sugary beverages and foods high in sugar.
- **Waist circumference. The lower number is between half your height in inches or 35 inches for women or 40 inches for men.** Fat around internal organs secretes hormones that encourage inflammation, triggering the release of white blood cells involved in atherosclerosis. Consume fewer calories, especially those from highly processed foods.

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).