

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### **Part 3: Food for Mood, Thought, and for Staying Healthy: Brain Healthy Snacks**

Nutrition is a core protective factor to promoting brain health and fighting brain illness. Throughout our **BRAIN HEALTH BOOST** series, the Brain Health Initiative will provide information to support your nutritional health. Today is nutrition part three and the focus is on replacing unhealthy snacks with brain healthy snacks.

Why would the food you eat today protect the current state of your health, and also have a cumulative effect and impact on your physical and brain health later in life? Science shows that several mechanisms may be involved, including lowering inflammation and oxidative stress, both throughout the body and within the brain. These are two general processes underlying many age-related chronic diseases and health conditions, such as brain illnesses like, dementia, as well as anxiety and depression. According to recent research, other potential mechanisms include improving glucose metabolism and insulin sensitivity.

Brain healthy food is a pretty powerful health booster. Whole grains, legumes, fruit, and vegetables are packed with fiber, which slows digestion and helps control blood sugar. Monounsaturated fats in olive oil, nuts, and fish can have anti-inflammatory effects, which may help stave off heart and brain illness and many other conditions like diabetes, and various types of cancer.

Foods that are brain unhealthy can degrade your physical and brain health, decrease your immunity to disease (like COVID-19), and diminish your overall sense of well-being. The Brain Health Initiative's scientific and clinical nutrition advisor, Uma Naidoo, MD, director of MGH Nutritional and Lifestyle Psychiatry, calls these foods the "usual suspects." Even though we know these foods are not good for us — snacks high in sugar, fried foods and processed foods — we may not realize they can also erode brain health and increase symptoms and incidence of brain illness.

Dr. Naidoo says it's okay to enjoy some treats during these challenging times, but the key is moderation. Go ahead and have your favorite not-so-healthy snack, but try eating a smaller portion, once a week.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

The Brain Health Initiative offers these brain healthy hints for managing your sweet and savory snack cravings:

- Make your eating environment brain healthy.
  - Try to buy fewer processed, high-salt or high-sugar snacks- if you don't have them in your pantry or fridge, you can't eat them.
  - Instead of foods like chips with a low nutrient density, load up on brain healthy foods that you can nibble on when you are in the mood for a snack (e.g., fruits, nuts, seeds, vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, and lean proteins- foods from food groups you are low on for the day).
  - Know when your body will be hungry for a snack and be prepared with brain healthy options.
- Pair antioxidant-rich dark natural chocolate with fresh orange or clementine segments.
- Make air-popped popcorn and add an interesting seasoning like taco spices for a nice crunchy snack with less oil.
- Experiment with oven-roasted kale chips to offset heavier and less healthy potato chips.
- Choose celery, carrot or pepper strips and salsa or hummus instead of chips and dip.
- Try a mixed berry salad with Greek yogurt and a drizzle of honey.
- Skip the high-sugar soda and juices; instead flavor water with edible citrus or berries.
- Plan and enjoy an occasional comfort food for a weekly treat — pick a day and enjoy whatever you want, just not all your favorites on the same day

### **About the Brain Health Initiative** ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to promoting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. Through education, research, innovation and action the collaboration between Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance intends to build brain healthy communities with cultures that increase brain health protective factors and reduce risk factors, improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Gulf Coast region and beyond. Join the movement, lifestyle makes a difference.

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