

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### **Brain Health Matters and Baking Makes a Difference**

*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 fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Today, we are looking at baking as respite for our brain health and a boost against brain illness.*

The hoarding began during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the country, people were buying huge supplies of toilet paper, disinfecting wipes, hand sanitizer, and yeast. Wait, yeast? Yes, we suddenly became a nation of bakers.

Psychologists point to baking as a coping mechanism for when we are feeling stressed or anxious. It is a distraction for what is going on around us — it's hard to scroll through our social media feed if we are up to our elbows in cookie dough. Baking also involves our senses including touch, taste, and smell. It stimulates our brains with creativity and engages our muscles as we mix, shape, and roll.

And then there is the result of our efforts. Vaile Wright, senior director of health care innovation for the American Psychological Association, was quoted in a recent [CNET post](#) that there is a neurobiological aspect to the sugar and carbs that triggers the parts of our brain that produce happy feelings.

But it is important to remember to practice some self-control when enjoying those holiday baked goods. The Brain Health Initiative's scientific and clinical nutrition advisor, Uma Naidoo, MD, director of MGH Nutritional and Lifestyle Psychiatry, says it's okay to enjoy some treats, but to do so in moderation. It's OK to have our favorite, not-so-healthy holiday snack, but we should aim for a smaller portion and limit ourselves to once a week. In addition, the Brain Health Initiative encourages you to choose brain healthier alternatives to ingredients that can sabotage your brain health.

With all of the stress and anxiety we are facing with the holidays, the pandemic and life in general, let's get our hands in some dough and punch and knead our way to a state of increased happiness and brain health.

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

Good nutrition is a crucial factor in protecting your brain health and fighting brain illness, and that includes reducing your intake of unhealthy foods that are high in saturated fat, sugar, and refined carbohydrates. Try baking with fresh fruits, whole grains, and nuts to make your baked goods healthier. And the spices used in holiday foods can also help your brain health. The Brain Health Initiative encourages regular use of many of the nuts and spices used in holiday cooking as they contain nutrients that may sharpen memory, reduce stress, decrease inflammation, boost immunity, and improve sleep, among other benefits.

- **Nuts.** Tree nuts are a good source of fiber, fat and protein. Walnuts have a high concentration of DHA, a type of omega-3 fatty acid and hazelnuts and almonds are rich sources of vitamin E. These nutrients offer many health benefits and can be a preventive agent against neurodegenerative diseases and age-related cognitive decline.
- **Cinnamon.** A staple of holiday baking, cinnamon has been shown to have antioxidant, antidiabetic, and antibacterial properties. Brain benefits associated with cinnamon include reduced inflammation, improved memory, increased attention, and enhanced cognitive processing.
- **Nutmeg.** The various compounds of nutmeg help boost mood, relieve pain, and relax blood vessels and lower blood pressure. Some research suggests that a nutrient found in nutmeg may also help slow cognitive decline in individuals with Alzheimer's disease and promote the recovery of brain tissue following a stroke.
- **Cloves.** This aromatic spice is loaded with antioxidant power. Cloves are natural anti-inflammatories and antimicrobials, local anesthetics, and have been found to have antifungal properties. A compound found in cloves has been shown to be more powerful than aspirin in helping to prevent blood clots.
- **Ginger.** An effective pain reliever, ginger helps reduce nausea, control inflammation, counters the activities of cell-damaging free radicals, acts as a blood thinner, and has been found to help protect brain cells from deterioration associated with Alzheimer's.
- **Turmeric.** A member of the ginger family, turmeric and its most active compound, curcumin, have proven health benefits. This bright yellow-orange spice that gives color to curry dishes has the potential to prevent heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and cancer. It's a potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant that may also help improve symptoms of depression and arthritis.
- **Cardamom.** Another relative of ginger and turmeric, cardamom also has antibacterial and antioxidant properties that help protect brain cells from free radical damage.

- **Adopt a Brain Healthy Lifestyle**, including thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotion
  - al wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

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

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).