



B vitamins help combat the brain drain of aging

What do these three meals have in common? >> A typical fortified breakfast cereal with milk

>> Broiled salmon with a spinach and garbanzo bean salad

>> Sautéed liver topped with caramelized onions

All three contain a relatively high concentration of three B vitamins: folic acid, vitamin B-6 and vitamin B-12. These three vitamins combined may be extremely important to protecting your brain from damage that commonly occurs with aging.

Question: Is a decline in mental function inevitable with aging?

Answer: "Senior moments" are commonly accepted as a normal part of aging but adequate intake of folic acid, B-6 and B-12 may prevent or at least delay these changes in brain function.

Q: How can these B vitamins help to prevent mental decline?

A: Evidence is mounting that diets containing plenty of these vitamins help reduce levels of homocysteine in the body. For about a decade, it has been accepted that higher levels of homocysteine increase the risk of heart disease by damaging blood

vessels that feed the heart. But the same concerns exist for the brain, since its function also is highly dependent on an extensive highway of healthy blood vessels.

Impaired mental function with aging is thought to be related to problems with the blood vessels feeding the brain, as well as the gradual destruction of brain cells. Over time, elevated homocysteine may damage blood vessels in the brain. Also, there is evidence that homocysteine has a direct toxic effect on nerve tissue in the brain.

Q: Can these three B vitamins protect against serious dementia such as Alzheimer's disease?

A: People with Alzheimer's disease generally have higher levels of homocysteine in the blood. However, it is not clear if homocysteine is part of the cause or an effect of the disease.

Q: Should older people take supplements containing these B vitamins?

A: Supplements may help, but since other nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids also may be important, overall good nutrition from a healthy diet may be most important to keeping blood ves-

sels and brain cells healthy for a lifetime.

If a dietary supplement is taken, it is safest to take in a moderate-dosage daily multivitamin rather than as separate vitamins. Excessive intake of vitamin B-6 can damage nerves.

Q: What about supplements sold to boost mental function?

A: A variety of supplements are promoted to enhance brain function. They often contain B vitamins and a variety of herbal ingredients such as ginkgo biloba, grape seed extract, bilberry and ginseng. Although the body of research on these ingredients is growing, limited scientific information makes long-term use risky.

Little is known about side-effects and interactions between these herbs and prescribed or over-the-counter drugs. It is the manufacturer's responsibility to determine that products are safe, but no pre-sale verification of safety is necessary. Unlike drug manufacturers, supplement-makers face no legal requirement to provide information about potential side-effects or drug interactions.

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