

Feed Your Body, Feed Your Brain: Nutritional Tips to Speed Recovery

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A healthy diet during the recovery from a brain injury is highly beneficial. Scientists know that deficiencies in certain nutrients and chemicals can cause disruptions in brain functioning and the ability to think clearly. The brain uses calories to function. When someone sustains a brain injury, it is necessary to eat enough nutritional calories to help the brain function efficiently.

Nutritional Tips for Head Injuries

- Eat small meals every three to four hours.
- Keep small baggies of healthy snacks with you during the day to boost your energy, such as nuts, trail mix, apples, cheese, hard-boiled eggs, and energy bars. Ask a member of your family or support group to make these for you and put them in a small cooler to take with you when away from home.
- Balance small meals with a combination of protein, healthy fats and oils, and carbohydrates. Proteins include fish, lean meats, nuts, and eggs. Healthy fats and oils can be found in avocados, seeds, and nuts. Carbohydrates are found in vegetables, fresh fruits, and grains. Avoid eating carbohydrates by themselves if you have blood sugar concerns. Many individuals report that sugar and chocolate increase headaches, so eat sweets sparingly.
- Eat moderately. Do not overeat as it can cause you to feel sleepy.
- Eat by the clock. If your brain/body signals are not working well, set a timer, watch alarm or a mobile phone to alert you that it's time to eat.
- Since weight gain is common following brain injury, this is another reason to stick to a healthy diet.
- Try to eat around the same time every day. The body does best when it is on a routine schedule.

It is very important to eat healthy foods to help the brain function efficiently. Feed your brain with protein snacks throughout the day.

Grocery Shopping and Menu Ideas

Shopping and preparing meals take a lot of energy. The grocery store is a very difficult environment when you have a head injury because of the lights, visual stimulation, and sounds.

- A magnetized notepad posted on the refrigerator is a time saver for writing down the food items to get during your next shopping trip. Photocopy a shopping list that you use regularly and circle the items you need to purchase during your next shopping trip. If you go to the same store each week, plan your list to follow the order of the aisles. For example, fresh foods usually line the walls or periphery of the grocery store, with packaged, canned, and frozen foods in the center aisles. This will help you conserve energy so that you won't have to make trips back and forth across the store.

- If you must go to the grocery store, try to choose a time when it is less crowded and less noisy. In the beginning, enlist the help of neighbors or friends to pick up the items on your shopping list when they are making a trip to the grocery store.
- If you are sensitive to noise and light, wear earplugs or filters and/or tinted glasses when shopping.
- Shop when you are well fed. You will make smarter food choices when you are not starving and your focus and attention will be sharper.
- Develop a list of your favorite fast, easy meal ideas. Keep this posted on your refrigerator or inside a cupboard door for easy access.
- Keep menus simple—avoid recipes with elaborate steps or unusual ingredients that aren't familiar to you.
- When preparing meals, always make extra to store in the refrigerator for the next day or two, or to put in the freezer. Put portions of foods into plastic or glass containers, and cover them with lids or plastic wrap.
- Throw protein foods out after three days in the refrigerator. Always practice safe food handling. Visit <http://www.foodsafety.gov> for further information.
- After a brain injury some people lose their sense of smell, and it is very important to be alert to the expiration dates on food.

What About Vitamins and Supplements?

There are many books and articles in magazines and on the Internet with tips and ideas for a healthy diet. It is highly recommended that fresh vegetables, fruits, fish, meats and grains are superior to processed foods and build the immune system. In addition, the following list of suggested supplements may help complement and enhance your nutritional intake.

- Multivitamins can supply the basic vitamins and supplements that your diet may be lacking.
- Omega-3 fatty acids counteract free radicals that cause oxidative damage to brain cells and may help improve nerve signal transmission at synapses.
- Probiotics is a beneficial bacteria that helps maintain a healthy intestine and aides in digestion.
- Antioxidants which include vitamins C, E, and beta carotene counteract oxidative damage caused by certain foods, and the stress caused by brain injury.
- Brain Vitale is a product that combines two beneficial brain nutrients which help repair neurons—phosphatidyl serine and acetyl carnitine.
- Coenzyme Q10 is a natural antioxidant that is necessary for the basic functioning of cells.
- Phosphatidyl serine (PS) aids in the proper release and reception of neurotransmitters in the brain and helps with memory.
- Acetyl L-carnitine plays a key role in fatty acid oxidation and is used to improve memory.
- B vitamins boost metabolism and effect brain and nervous system functioning.
- GPC — glycerophosphocholine helps to sharpen alertness, reasoning, information processing, and other types of mental performance.

Consult a nutritionist or health care provider for an individualized program of supplementation. By eating well, you are developing a good foundation for recovery of your body and brain.

Foods to Avoid

Try to avoid the following foods:

- Alcohol
- Caffeine
- Salty foods
- Excessive sweets and candy

Warning:

You may find that if you drink alcohol following your injury, it may have a stronger effect than before because your tolerance level has changed. Alcohol may interact with prescription medications. Some people may turn to alcohol or other addictive substances to medicate themselves for physical or emotional pain. "It has been said that there should be no bottom line here. The use of these drugs in an already disrupted physiological system will further induce neurological and cognitive decline. They should be avoided by survivors of TBI.¹

Resources

¹ Jay, G. 2000. Minor Traumatic Brain Injury Handbook: Diagnosis and Treatment. New York: CRC Press.

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