

# Diet may tune learning and memory, from baby's first bite to Grandpa's dinner plate

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An artistic fusion of a glowing human brain and vibrant whole foods, symbolizing the lifelong connection between nutrition and cognitive health. Generated by AI tools for illustrative purposes

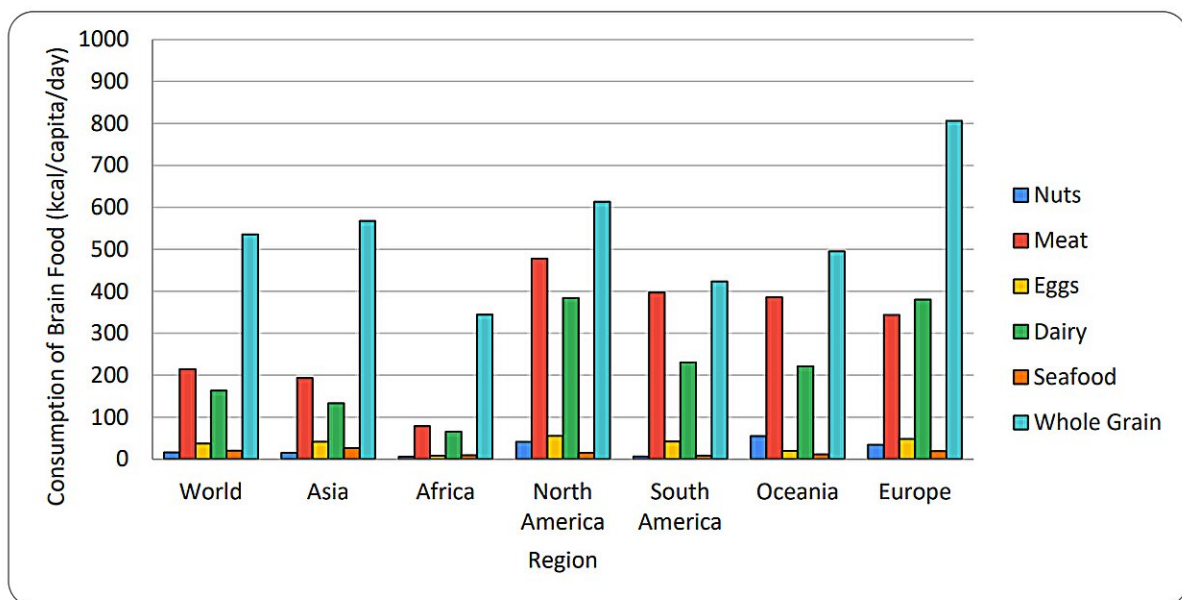
For centuries, people have been trying to assess if what we eat can make us smarter. Ancient declarations and modern superfood trends have

given rise to the belief that foods can enhance brainpower. But beyond the tales and marketing, what does science say about the link between food and the mind?

As surprising as it may sound, the food on our plate can impact our brainpower early in life and as we grow older. According to new evidence summarized by a comprehensive review [published in \*Nutrients\*](#), a plethora of common food items could be altering memory and attention in people throughout life and have other benefits.

Making changes to your diet and food choices can help boost your brainpower. Researchers are finding clues that both plant- and animal-based foods, from eggs and fish to leafy greens, berries, nuts, and whole grains, help keep your brain sharper at any age.

To uncover these insights, the authors meticulously combed through 54 studies (from trials to cohort surveys), providing a clearer picture of how our dietary choices contribute to lifelong brain health.



Consumption of brain foods in kcal/capita/day by global region (Data source: FAOSTAT, 2023). Note that consumption data for Berries and Leafy vegetables were not available on FAOSTAT. Credit: Chante Hardaway et al, Brain Foods: A Narrative Review of Food Items and Their Impact on Cognition over the Life Course, *Nutrients* (2026). DOI: 10.3390/nu18111779

## **Can an egg a day make a toddler smarter?**

Experts note that the first years are a special time for brain growth. Nutrition can supply crucial building blocks: for example, eggs pack choline, B vitamins, and protein—all key ingredients for neural development. Meat and nuts also provide iron, zinc and healthy fats. In fact, the World Health Organization calls meat "the best source of nutrient-rich foods" for toddlers.

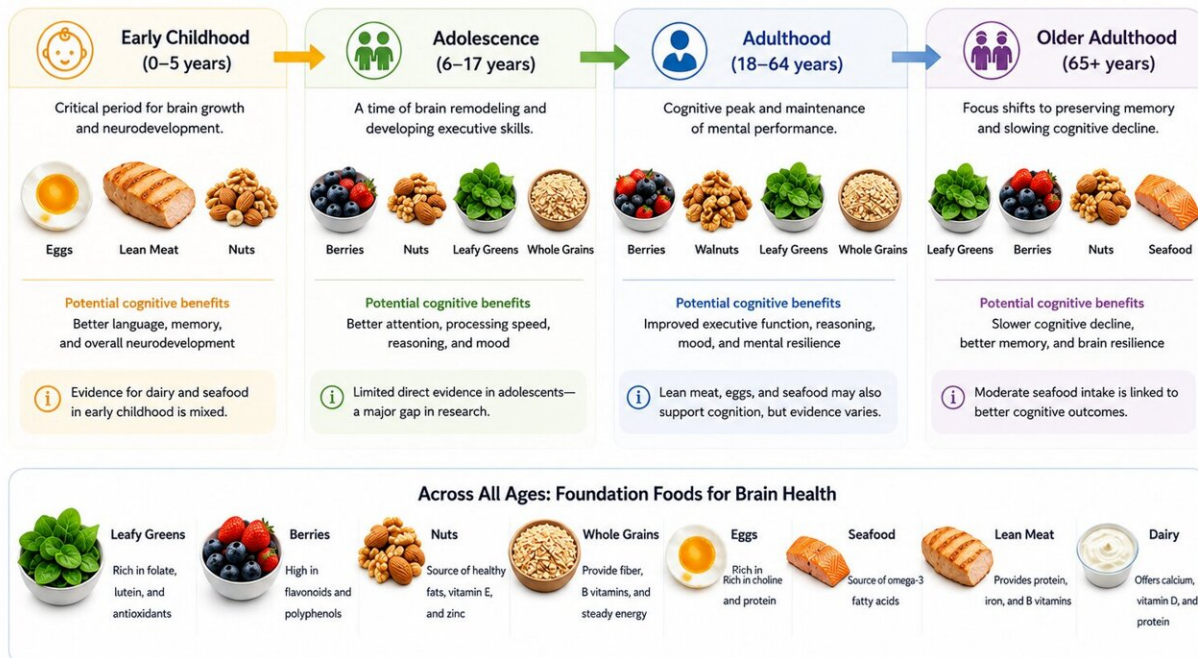
Observational studies find that young children with higher intakes of eggs, meat, and nuts often score slightly higher on early development tests. (Evidence for dairy or fish was weaker.)

## **Blueberries, broccoli and beyond**

As children grow older, the evidence is sketchy but suggestive. Berries and walnuts are usually at the top. [Blueberry](#) or walnut supplements have shown some positive effects on healthy adults' memory, attention and mood. Leafy greens that will help brain health include spinach and kale. An antioxidant and vitamin-rich food, these two can help sharpen thinking.

Beans and whole grains provide sustained energy and B vitamins to complete the picture. In fact, older individuals who adhered to the

["MIND" diet](#) lost cognitive skills at a much slower rate than those who didn't. The MIND diet is rich in greens, berries, nuts, beans, poultry, and fish.



A life-course timeline showing which foods benefit cognition at different ages, generated using AI with the information provided from the summary tables in the paper.

## Slowing decline: Salad and salmon for seniors

Modest effects of diet shifts in the golden years. The highest [fish eaters](#) have a significantly reduced risk of dementia compared to the lowest fish eaters, according to meta-analysis research. Omega-3 fats are responsible for this.

Studies focused on older people also highlight berries. In small studies,

people who consumed blueberry or mixed-berry supplements experienced improved memory and processing speed. Seniors who eat a Mediterranean-style diet heavy on vegetables, fish, nuts, and olive oil tend to preserve their memory and thinking skills longer. Yet, professionals stress that these advantages are limited and no single food cures all.

## **Gaps on the menu**

Crucially, scientists say, the evidence has big gaps. Nearly all the studies so far are observational (diet questionnaires and brain tests), which can't prove cause and effect. Study methods vary widely, and most data come from wealthy countries.

Surprisingly, almost nothing is known about diet and cognition in teenagers. Data from low- and middle-income countries are also scarce, even though nutrient deficiencies are common there. The researchers warn that long-term, well-controlled trials in diverse populations are urgently needed.

For now, the take-home message is still common sense: a varied, nutrient-dense diet is a safe bet. The authors conclude that "nutrient-dense foods, including ASF and plant-based sources, support cognitive outcomes across the life course." In practice, that means a plate with eggs, fish or lean meat, leafy greens, berries, nuts, and whole grains. These are the same foods nutritionists already encourage for health—and, as the review suggests, they may do brains a favor too.

Indeed, heart-healthy choices like fatty fish, fruits, and vegetables often show brain benefits as well. Nobody's complaining about more spinach or berries; this review hints that these simple foods could be doing our minds a lot of good. These nutrient-rich staples might keep our thinking sharper at every age, especially later in life.

**More information:** Chante Hardaway et al, Brain Foods: A Narrative Review of Food Items and Their Impact on Cognition over the Life Course, *Nutrients* (2026). [DOI: 10.3390/nu18111779](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu18111779)

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