

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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It can happen so slowly that you barely notice the little problems until the big problem is hard to ignore. Or in a few people, mental decline seems to happen overnight. But the hard facts are that more and more of us are living long enough to suffer 'mental decline' or 'loss of cognitive function'. This is not Alzheimer's disease, it's just that memory, language skills, attention and the ability to reason and make decisions gradually go away, on a long, slow downhill slide. Of course there's lots of research looking for pills and cures and magic bullets to reverse mental decline. But the best evidence so far for preventing it seems to lie with a good diet years before it starts.

Recent research at Oregon Health and Science University studied over 100 elderly adults. Their average age was 87. These participants took a whole range of tests, both physical (blood, MRI, etc.) and mental. By using blood tests to determine the nutrition status the doctors did not need to depend on how well people remembered what they had been eating. And no one had to try to analyze hundreds of different foods to figure out what nutrients each food had. After comparing how sharp the volunteers were mentally with what their blood results and brain scans showed, they found some very interesting matches, both good and bad.

The volunteers who had the best mental functioning were those who had high blood levels of vitamins C, D, E and the B vitamins folate, thiamin (B1), riboflavin (B2) and B6. These people had kept their attention spans, their visual function (so important for driving) and their ability to organize and plan better than the rest of the group. When

the MRI results were used, these were the same people who had the largest brains. Bigger brains make it easier to think well!

Where do these positive nutrients come from? They come from fruits and vegetables of many colors, from beans, whole grains, fish and lean meats. They come from a balanced diet eaten over many years. The downhill slide of our mental functioning can often be seen while we're still in our mid-forties. Waiting till we're 65 to change our eating habits is much too late! Plus, we don't usually absorb nutrients as well from supplements and pills. We often don't get a good balance if we're taking super-large doses of one and not much of another. Start your healthy eating early to keep going later.

On the other hand, the people with the highest amounts of trans fats in their blood were the ones who did the worst on the mental tests. And those MRI scans showed that the people with the most trans fat in their blood were the ones with smaller brains! Less brain space makes it even harder to keep the brain going. This was interesting because we've known for years that trans fats are bad for our hearts. They probably increase our risk of cancers. But medical science had not recognized that they were also so bad for our brains.

Trans fats are mostly found in commercial baked goods including mixes, in fried foods and snacks, and in many fast foods. The more of these foods we eat, the more problems we're likely to have later. And since fat in general has more than double the calories of sugar or protein, people who eat a lot of trans fat foods are more likely to be overweight as well. The most important way to avoid trans fats is to read the food labels. The amount of trans fat has to be listed on the label. As little as possible is the

key to better health.

Here's a recipe using prepared products to cut your work time. But the ingredients are super healthy. Use a garlic-seasoned rotisserie chicken for lots of flavor. It's dinner in a dish that's ready in minutes. Eat well, stay smart!

Penne with Garlic and Chicken

2 cups cooked chicken, cubed

2 cups grape tomatoes, halved

1 cup prepared pesto

1 ¼ cups whole wheat penne pasta

¼ cup reduced sodium chicken broth

1 9-oz pkg baby spinach

¼ tsp crushed red pepper

4 tsp grated Parmesan cheese

Let tomatoes drain cut side down. Cook pasta according to package directions. Drain.

In skillet heat broth till boiling. Add spinach and stir 1 minute until spinach starts to wilt.

Add chicken, red pepper and a pinch of salt if desired. Cook 2 more minutes. Stir in

pesto, drained pasta and tomatoes. Cook 5 minutes until everything is heated through.

Sprinkle with Parmesan. Serves 4.