

## Feed your child's brain

The brain takes priority in nutrient supplies over all our other organs and uses 20% of our oxygen and calorie intake. This makes it the most metabolically active part of the body. As parents and carers we can do much to help our child's brain development by giving them foods rich in the nutrients that the brain needs to grow and be healthy.

### The developing brain

Brain structure is laid down by both genetics and environmental factors such as food, learning and exercise. Early nutrient deficiencies can have an impact on the growing brain, so it is good to be aware of the key nutrients for brain development. Significant stages of brain development include the third trimester of pregnancy until the age of two when the brain undergoes rapid growth and a period during adolescence when the brain undergoes pruning.



### Nutrition

Key nutrients for brain health include:

- **Proteins** – these provide the building blocks for brain structure and neurotransmitters. Focus on eating eggs, fish, meat, nuts, seeds, legumes, and lentils.
- **Fats** – these are essential for all cell membranes, cognitive function and mood. Omega-3 fatty acid DHA is key. Focus on eating eggs, fish, meat, nuts, seeds and avocado.
- **Carbohydrates** – these provide glucose and fuel for the brain. Focus on eating a 'rainbow of vegetables' (a variety of different coloured vegetables) and oats. Avoid processed and refined carbohydrates.
- **Iron** – this is important for brain energy, neurotransmitters and development. Focus on eating liver, broccoli, eggs, quinoa and chicken.
- **Iodine** – this is needed for central nervous system development and any deficiencies can impact on intelligence.

Focus on eating sea vegetables, eggs, and fish.

- **Zinc** – this is abundant in the brain and contributes to function, growth and structure. Focus on eating fish, seeds, nuts, red meat and chicken.

### Balance

A key factor for brain health, concentration and mood is to ensure that the timing of our meals and the food we eat gives us a balanced blood sugar. Eating enough protein, fibre and slow release carbohydrates are key to keeping levels even.

### Anti-nutrients

Anti-nutrients are factors which may have a detrimental affect on brain health for some individuals. These include trans fats, gluten, artificial sweeteners, high sugar intake, caffeine, and high toxin exposure (cigarette smoke, household chemicals, toiletries etc.).

### Lifestyle

Lifestyle factors that support brain health include keeping well hydrated, getting adequate sleep and exercise, and learning.

### Help your children be brain-aware

Talk to children about 'feeding their growing brains', explaining what their brain does and introducing key foods that support brain development. Hard boiled eggs, vegetable kebabs, fish pate and avocado mousse recipes can be simple ways to engage children in cooking with a very clear purpose for their own health and development.

### About the author

The Food Teacher, Katharine Tate, has worked as a teacher and education consultant internationally in primary and secondary schools for over 20 years. Qualified as a registered nutritional therapist, Katharine combines her unique education and nutrition expertise to offer schools, organisations and families advice, education programmes, practical workshops, and individual/family consultations.

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