

Mastermind.

Boosting brain power.

Turning your brain into a lean mean thinking machine can be achieved through some simple lifestyle and dietary changes.

So read on for some tips you can put into practice that will positively impact:

- Performance
- Energy
- Vitality
- Resilience



Top 10 keys to unlocking brain power and boosting mental acuity

1. Enjoy a wholesome breakfast that is high in both complex carbohydrates and good lean proteins. Include some colourful fruits to further boost brain function.
2. Don't be a slave to technology - the distractions of email and voicemail messages may decrease the IQ by up to 10 points. Schedule message checking blocks of time in your work day.
3. Ensure you allow for a minimum of 8 hours sleep each night - the brain keeps an exact account of how much sleep it is owed. Tiredness compounds other issues such as alcohol toxicity, dehydration and oxygen depletion resulting in sluggish brain function.
4. Get high on brain foods - we can turn the brain into a lean mean thinking machine simply by eating and drinking the right food and drink at the right times. See the full list of brain food choices overleaf.
5. Work out - be active. Exercise boosts circulation and bolsters brain nurturing chemicals that improve creativity, reaction time and retention. Schedule your workouts into your working week to ensure they don't get missed.

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6. Practice some mental gymnastics – mastering a new skill, engaging in friendly debate and doing puzzles stimulates blood flow and strengthens the connections (synapses) between nerve cells and the brain.
7. Go alternative – there is a lot of research now that supports the use of aromatherapies to boost brain function – these can be included via flower/greenery selections, food and beverage selections, scented candles/ oil burners or through aromatherapy massage and essential oil products. See the list of beneficial brain aromas and how to incorporate them below.
8. Environment – optimum room temperature is about 20-22°C for a clothed person in the winter, and 20-24°C in the summer. Above optimum temperature may make you tired and sleepy, below optimum temperature may cause restlessness and inattention. It is also important to ensure there is good quality air circulation. If less than optimum conditions exist, try to get outside and breathe on your breaks.
9. Positivity – thinking positive and loving thoughts, feeling love and compassion activates the brain, turning it into high speed circuitry. Emotions play a strong part in mental acuity.
10. Take a break – keep to the 55 – 5 rule where possible during your work day. Taking a five minute break every hour will ensure your brain stays switched on to your work. See the list of suggestions for the 5 minute break including mind clearing meditation and ideal re-fuelling ideas to the right.

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Give yourself a break - Take 5 every 55

Chronobiologists have found that the body's hormone, glucose and blood pressure levels drop every 60 mins or so. By failing to seek recovery and overriding the body's natural stress-rest cycles, performance is compromised. Short focused breaks (3 to 5 mins) can promote significant recovery. Try adding some of the following five minute activities into your work day:

- Refresh and re-fuel, try some of the ideal fruit, nut and beverage selections. Get up, walk, talk and munch
- Try some desk stretches and breathing meditation to ease neck and shoulder tensions and boost clarity of mind
- Take a toilet break on a different floor – use the stair route there and back
- Create a relaxing screensaver or switch off your screen to rest the eyes and take some refreshing breaths of air

Brain boosting foods and fluids

The brain is the greediest organ in the body, with some quite specific dietary requirements. Eating the right foods at the right time can turn the brain into a lean mean thinking machine. Try to choose foods and beverages using the following guidelines:

- **Complex carbohydrates** like whole grain cereals, breads, pasta and potatoes... these digest slower and supply the slow release of energy and glucose that best supports brain function
- **The brain is 12% fat** – fish, especially the fatty fishes like salmon, sardines and mackerel are ideal to keep the brain well oiled

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- **Colourful fruits and vegetables** - these are high in antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals that maintain brain health and enhance mental performance. Choose the dark green leafy vegetables, broccoli, cabbage, sprouts, kale, red/yellow peppers, tomatoes, carrots, squash and beetroot. Select fruits that are high in colour like berries, cherries, oranges, red grapes and peaches
- **Proteins** - especially from lean sources, are needed to manufacture brain tissue, enzymes, neurotransmitters and a myriad of other brain chemicals
- When thinking about breakfast spreads to go with the wholegrain toast - Marmite is a great option, it is high in B vitamins which have brain boosting powers
- **Yoghurt** - whether at breakfast or a dessert option - contains the amino acid tyrosine which improves both alertness and memory
- **Best fruits** - strawberries and blueberries have been shown to boost coordination, concentration and short term memory so include them where you can on your meal and snack menu
- **Caviar** is top brain food as it contains an excellent source of essential fatty acids
- Not all oils are equal when it comes to brain function - use flaxseed, canola, soy or walnut oils in dressings and cooking
- **Nuts and seeds** make ideal snacking choice, these nutrient packed goodies are rich in good oils, fibre, protein, vitamins and minerals
- **Energy bars** - especially those rich in complex carbohydrates, fibre and protein make great snacks

- **Nothing beats drinking water.** This essential fluid is vital for memory and accelerates brain function. Drink it not too cold and drink it often! Aim for at least 2L of pure water each day
- **Caffeine** - a little can help. No more than 1 in the morning and 1 after lunch - be sure to drink with a glass of water to offset it's diuretic effect
- Colourful natural juices can be very appealing as well as being high in antioxidants

Food and drink to avoid

- **Turkey** - including cold cut for sandwiches in salads or as roast. Turkey contains tryptofan which can make you drowsy
- **High fat foods** clog the brain - so avoid any fried foods including chips, crisps, butter, cream based foods and heavy sauces
- **Sugary drinks** like Cola, Fanta and Lemonade or high sugar snacks may give a quick high, but they result in a bigger low and can lead to head bob's and drowsiness
- **Caffeine** - in excess this can adversely affect concentration, lead to dehydration and impair quality of sleep. Stick with the limits suggested above
- **Alcohol** - see what you can do to discourage social drinking by including attractive alternatives. The toxic effects of alcohol decrease brain function and clarity of thinking

Physical exercise can boost the brain as well as the brawn

Getting active:

- Improves learning, concentration and abstract abilities
- Slows the decline in mental function that comes with age
- Promotes the growth of new brain cells
- Yoga and other relaxation based activities have mood altering abilities
- Aim to get active on a minimum of 5 days a week for at least 30 minutes
- Spend a few minutes of each workout doing some relaxing activity like stretching

Aromatherapy - the alternative aid

Aromatherapy is a powerful treatment that uses essential oils for therapeutic purposes. They work by stimulating the limbic system in the brain which is responsible for memory and emotions. Certain essential oils can impact positively on brain function:

- Rosemary = mental clarity and alertness
- Basil oil = dispels mental fatigue and promotes focus
- Peppermint oil = stimulant for the mind
- Lemon oil = pick me up for the mind
- Sandalwood = relaxing and soothing, ideal for unwinding at the end of the day
- Lavender = relaxing, soothing and healing also an ideal end of day aroma

Putting aromatherapy to work for you

Think about including some of the aromatherapy suggestions in:

- The foliage in flower arrangements
- Food and beverage selections including sauces, teas and flavourings
- Try burning select aromatherapy candles or use an essential oil burner
- See if you can book a massage with a therapist trained in aromatherapy
- Use aromatherapy bath oils to help you rejuvenate after your day

References and resources

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(Reviewed by Dr Sabine Donnai,

Medical Director, Nuffield Proactive Health)