

6 things a neurologist does to keep his brain healthy

Brain atrophy tends to begin in your 30s and 40s, but certain lifestyle changes can slow or even reverse shrinkage.

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By [Anahad O'Connor](#) – Washington Post

As you get older, something alarming happens to your brain: It shrinks.

This brain atrophy, which to some extent is a normal part of aging, typically begins in your 30s and 40s and accelerates after age 70, especially in people with conditions such as [Alzheimer's disease](#) and other types of dementia. The reduction in brain volume is driven in part by shrinking brain cells and the loss of connections between them. It occurs most prominently in the frontal cortex and the hippocampus, two areas of the brain that are critical for memory, high-level thinking, planning and decision-making. Over time, this atrophy can lead to problems with memory and cognitive function.

But this decline does not have to be inevitable, said Majid Fotuhi, a neurologist and author of the new book “The Invincible Brain: The Clinically Proven Plan to Age-Proof Your Brain and Stay Sharp for Life.”

Fotuhi, an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins and an expert on neuroplasticity, has [published studies](#) showing that you can slow brain atrophy or even increase the size of your hippocampus and frontal cortex with the right lifestyle behaviors. According to Fotuhi, there are at least six things you can do:

Eat a Mediterranean diet. Focus on foods such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans, whole grains, [seafood](#) and olive oil, which contain nutrients that are important for brain health.

Exercise. Studies have found that engaging in [aerobic exercise](#) increases the size of both the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex, in part because it increases levels of BDNF, a protein that promotes the growth of neurons. Ask The

Challenge your brain. [Learning new skills](#) and information can increase the number of synapses in your brain, which can also increase the volume of your brain.

Get enough sleep. [Sleeping well at night](#) helps to clear metabolic waste from your brain.

Meditate. It lowers cortisol, a stress hormone that can be harmful to your brain when chronically elevated. Studies have also found that [meditation](#) increases cerebral blood flow and strengthens connections between neurons.

Find purpose in life. Studies have found that having a [sense of purpose](#) in life is associated with better brain health and a larger hippocampus. But it's not entirely clear why that is, Fotuhi said.

We wanted to learn more about the nutrition and lifestyle behaviors that help keep your [brain young and resilient](#). So, we caught up with Fotuhi to find out what he eats in a typical day, which nutritious foods he consumes at almost every meal, and why he says that blueberries, dark chocolate and salmon are some top brain foods.

Majid Fotuhi. (Courtesy Majid Fotuhi)

Can you talk about the lifestyle factors that influence our brain health?

Yes, there are factors that can chip away at your brain and make it smaller and more prone to Alzheimer's disease. These include obesity, diabetes, insomnia, concussions and poor diet. But at the same time, there are many factors that can grow your brain. Exercise is perhaps the most effective way to grow the size of your cortex and hippocampus.

The second thing that has been shown to grow the brain is brain training — learning new things. Learning a new language, learning to play golf, learning to juggle — learning any new skill can grow your brain. The brain is very much like a muscle, the more you use it, the bigger and stronger it gets.

Another thing is meditation. It's been shown in studies to grow the size of the cortex and hippocampus in part by increasing blood flow to the brain.

You mentioned poor sleep. How does that affect the brain?

It's really important to treat sleep issues, especially sleep apnea, which affects a lot of people. When you have untreated sleep apnea, your brain shrinks. But when you treat sleep apnea with a CPAP machine, your brain grows back.

What impact does an unhealthy diet have on the brain?

Eating a poor diet shrinks your cortex and hippocampus. But if you eat a healthy diet, for example a Mediterranean diet, you prevent that shrinkage. Eating a healthy diet doesn't necessarily grow your brain. But it prevents the shrinkage of the cortex and hippocampus that can occur by eating a poor diet.

What is the best diet for brain health?

There are dozens of studies showing that the Mediterranean diet is particularly helpful for keeping your brain young. One study found that people who ate a Mediterranean diet on a regular basis had fewer plaques and tangles in their brains, and their brains looked much younger compared to people who did not follow a Mediterranean diet.

What are some dietary principles that you follow?

I think the most important thing you can do for your brain in terms of diet is to avoid highly processed foods like doughnuts, cookies, muffins and sodas. I don't eat cookies and doughnuts. I really focus on eating fresh fruits and vegetables, and I try to prepare food at home as much as possible.

What's a typical breakfast for you?

I eat breakfast between 7 and 8 a.m. I usually eat oatmeal with milk and some raisins and bananas. I add two scoops of protein powder because I know it's important to get enough protein each day. That's my usual morning. Some mornings I may have an omelet, and I love to add mushrooms, spinach and tomatoes.

What do you eat for lunch?

I eat lunch around 1 p.m. and I usually have a cup of Greek yogurt. I've been eating it pretty much every day of my life since I was a child. I love the taste of Greek yogurt, and I know that it's rich in probiotics. I add blueberries because I like the taste, and I know that they can stimulate the production of BDNF, which is a neuroprotective protein. It's like fertilizer for the brain. It has extensive benefits for aging, for healing after concussion, for blood flow. In general, it's the best neuroprotective protein that we know of for the brain.

What are some other foods that promote BDNF?

Eating salmon can increase BDNF in the brain, and dark chocolate, as well.

Do you snack during the day?

If I'm at home working, I may take a break and eat a tangerine or an apple. I may have a small piece of dark chocolate. In our house we always have a bowl of fruit on the table. So, I'll just take whatever is there.

What do you eat for dinner?

I usually eat dinner early, around 4:30 or 5 p.m. My lovely wife often prepares meals. It could be salmon and vegetables, for example, or chicken and vegetables. We have red meat once a week, no more than

twice a week, along with our vegetables. I also love black beans. They're good for you, and I love the taste of them. But we usually have some mixture of meat and vegetables. I often have Greek yogurt with dinner, as well. I am what you call a Greek yogurt addict. The yogurt is always there. It's like, "What else am I going to have with my yogurt today?"

Do you eat dessert or have any snacks after dinner?

No. One thing I've learned is that the more you eat, the more you crave food. And the less you eat, the less hungry you get. I eat less than I used to, and I don't get that hungry. I eat small portions.

What do you do for exercise?

I have a Peloton bike at home. About three or four days a week, I'll jump on it for an hour, and I'll get a good sweat. Then I'll do 45 minutes of weight training. And then one day a week I like to go for a long bike ride. I'll bike 60 to 80 miles at a time. I live in Northern Virginia, and there are a lot of great bike trails around here. I love being in nature. As I'm biking, I'll see deer and beautiful scenery. This is the time when I get a lot of ideas.

What parting advice do you have for our readers?

You have good things and bad things that happen to your brain every day based on your daily choices. If you're someone who stresses out about every little thing, that's going to shrink your brain a little bit every day. Whereas a person who has a sense of purpose and has peace and calm, they grow their brain a little bit every day. If you exercise and eat a healthy diet, that's going to protect and grow your brain. It's important for people to understand that their daily habits have a huge impact on their brain health.