



# Healthy Brain Healthy Nerves

*By Jinny Tavee, MD*

## Introduction

This is a list of lifestyle changes for two kinds of people:

- 1 Those of you with chronic neurological disorders who have been told that there is no cure for your disease and that you just have to learn to live with the symptoms.
- 2 Those of you who are currently well, but would like to learn how to maintain positive lifestyle habits that help promote a healthy brain and neurological system.

The good news is that you can make a huge difference in how you feel by taking an active role in your own treatment. Optimize your diet, exercise regularly, and learn how to train your body and mind so that you can live the best life possible.

# Nutrition



This is by no means a complete and exhaustive guide to nutrition. It is simply a suggested list of foods to try, reduce, or avoid that I give to all of my patients who are interested in learning how to eat a healthy diet. Some of these things may seem hard to do. A few of my patients look at the list of what they should and should not eat, and already feel discouraged. Healthy organic food is often expensive, not readily available, and doesn't always taste as good as the regular food we usually eat. It's perfectly natural that you don't want to spend a fortune at a fancy organic grocery store every week or give up your morning shot of brand name coffee. I've starred\* the most important things on the list so that you don't have to starve yourself or lose out on the natural joy of eating. And give yourself a freebie day once in a while to eat the things you like. A balanced diet can't happen without a balanced mind.

With regards to the foods you should limit or eat in moderation, there is not enough scientific evidence to remove gluten from the diet if you do not have a gluten allergy or a disease called celiac sprue. Gluten is found in whole grains, which are actually part of a healthy, balanced diet. However, I've had a number of patients tell me that cutting gluten from their diet helped decrease their pain from arthritis and nerve disease. You may want to just try decreasing it or eliminating it completely from your diet for two weeks to see what happens. Otherwise, the recommendation is just to eat it in moderation and stick to whole grains. Also, for patients with more advanced stages of ALS or severe muscle and nerve diseases, you may need additional sources of protein. If you can't get enough from fish, chicken, or beans, you may have to look to leaner cuts of red meat.

## Healthy Food

### Fish\*

- steamed, baked, broiled, stir-fried, sautéed or sushi (not battered and deep-fried)
- best source of omega 3 fatty acids
- at least 3 servings a week, but aim for 5 (due to the increasing amount of ocean pollutants in the form of mercury, there is currently an FDA warning for restriction of fish to less than 12 oz. per week for young children, nursing mothers, and women who are pregnant or who are planning to become pregnant; limit to 6 oz. per week for canned albacore tuna, also known as "white tuna")
- wild-caught is best rather than farm-raised, but if too pricey, the amount eaten per week is more important

## Fruits and Vegetables\*

- at least 5-6 servings/day
- look for brightly colored ones like blueberries, spinach, strawberries, beets, and red bell peppers (high in flavonoids which are great antioxidants)
- locally grown and/or organic if possible, but if not available or too expensive, then the daily amount of fruits/vegetables is more important; wash well
- dried fruit, fruit juices, and applesauce are okay if they are not sweetened but will have more calories than fresh fruits
- high-fiber foods like sweet potatoes and squash can help stand in for rice or bread and take care of your carb cravings; you can even make "french fries" from butternut squash and "pasta noodles" out of spaghetti squash

**Soy milk and yogurt**

**Soy cheese**

**Tofu**

**Herbal tea** (especially green tea)

**Nuts:** almonds, walnuts, macadamia nuts, pecans, hazelnuts, brazil nuts (an ounce/day)

**Almond or Macadamia nut butter**

**Cocoa/chocolate** (made of at least 70% cocoa, although this is often bitter – okay if the content is a little lower, but try unsweetened or naturally sweetened)

**Chicken or Turkey breast without skin**

**Flaxseeds**

- milled or ground for the body to absorb
- general recommendation is 2 tsp daily
- mix with yogurt, cereals, juice, or smoothies
- careful in men as jury is still out on possible increased risk of prostate CA due to alpha-linoleic acid content

**Sprouted grain bread and cereal (gluten free)**

**Quinoa**

**Brown rice**

**Brown rice pasta**

**Brown rice crackers**

**Beans**

**Egg whites**

**Spices:** ginger, garlic, chili peppers, turmeric (may help with Alzheimer's), cinnamon, oregano

**Coconut oil**

**Extra virgin olive oil** (preferably in a dark bottle/container)

**Canola oil**

**Organic cane sugar**

**Honey for sugar substitute**

**Agave juice for sugar substitute**

**Water – 6 to 8 glasses/day**

## Foods to Limit or Eat in Moderation

**Gluten** (wheat flour, breads, bran, pasta, soy sauce)

- may be pro-inflammatory
- if no difference in your symptoms after cutting it for 2 weeks, incorporate whole grains into your diet with whole grain breads and pasta

**Corn starch, corn syrup**

**Dairy** (try for fat free skim milk rather than whole milk)

**Egg yolks** (although a good source of Vitamin E and lecithin, limit to 2-3 egg yolks per week, especially if you have high cholesterol)

**Sugar**

**Processed/refined white flour**

**Red meat** (stick to leaner cuts of red meats/pork)

**Pork**

**Deli meats** (has preservatives, nitrites, salt)

**Dried sweetened fruit and sweetened fruit juices** (lots of sugar)

**White rice**

**Instant tea**

**Caffeinated beverages** (substitute caffeinated green tea for coffee if you need the caffeine)

**Alcohol**

**Soft drinks**

## Foods to Eliminate

**Artificial sweeteners** (sucralose and aspartame)

**Artificial fat** (olestra)

**Artificial flavorings and food dyes**

**MSG** (this may be tough to do as it is in a lot of foods, especially Asian seasonings and flavoring packets)

## Avoid

Heating things in plastic containers and plastic wrap – switch to glass containers, paper plates, and paper towels in microwave (chemicals are given off by the plastic when heated)

Canned foods, especially acidic foods like tomato sauce as the acids can interact with the chemicals in the can

Eating after 9 pm – the later you eat, the higher the chance of weight gain



## Exercise

Any exercise at least 30 minutes a day, 3 days a week:  
walk, jog, bike, swim, stepping machine, elliptical trainer, physical therapy, aqua therapy, stretching exercises



### 4 Rules of Exercise

1. Pick something you like or can tolerate .
2. Try to do something every day.
3. If you feel tired or worse 2 hours after you've worked out, you've done too much.
4. "No Pain No Gain" does not apply for patients with medical conditions such as muscle or nerve diseases.

## Mind/Body Training

Yoga, Tai Chi, or Qigong

**Meditation at least 10 minutes a day**  
(30 minutes or more is best)



### Breathing Meditation Instructions For Beginners

- Find a comfortable place to sit: in a chair, on a cushion, or even on the floor.
- Place your hands in your lap, one on top of the other, palms up.
- Close the eyes and relax.
- Focus all of your attention at the center of your abdomen just a few fingers breadth above your belly button.
- With inhalation, feel the abdomen tighten and pull in. With exhalation, observe how the abdomen relaxes and distends.
- Just breathe normally and observe the movements of the abdomen as it inflates when you breathe in and as it deflates when you breathe out.
- Keep the mind at the abdomen with each breath, in and out.

## Get a Good Night's Sleep

The amount of sleep each person needs is different and changes with age. For most adults, try to get about 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night. If you're having problems with insomnia, try a little meditation.

### Putting It All Together

It's a lot to remember, but if you can just modify your diet to include the recommended amounts of fish and fruits/vegetables as well as keeping up with exercise and mind-body training (meditation, yoga, tai chi), you will see a change in your life for the better. Good luck and stay tuned for the full-length book, "A Cup of Salt: 5 steps to a healthy brain and a healthy mind," coming in 2011!

### About the Author

**Dr. Jinny Tavee** is a staff neurologist specializing in neuromuscular disorders and integrative holistic medicine at the Cleveland Clinic. She is actively involved in researching the effects of meditation on chronic neurological diseases and has led a number of meditation retreats for Cleveland Clinic patients as well as injured U.S. Marines returning from the Gulf War through the Wounded Warriors program.

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