



**Cook Wise.  
Eat Wise.  
Live Wise.**

A monthly nutrition and wellness newsletter brought to you by University Housing and Dining.

**May 2021**  
*Fuel for Finals Edition*

# What's the Tea?



## Fueling for Finals: Can Nutrition Affect Academic Performance?

Whether you're consumed with writing papers, preparing presentations or studying for exams, finals can take a toll on your mental and physical health. Making nutritious food choices during this time can help you fuel your body and brain so they can function at their best to achieve better academic performance. Fueling properly from both a macro- and micro-nutrient level is key to maintain overall energy levels, enhance brain function and improve our overall health so that we can better manage the inherent stress associated with this season.

Let's look at fueling at the macronutrient level first – energy. Studies show that hunger due to insufficient food intake (i.e. energy) is associated with lower grades and an inability to focus among students, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The human body produces energy by breaking down the food we eat into three main macronutrients, which are carbohydrates, protein and fat. These three macros work together to fuel our basic metabolic functions, such as breathing, digestion and brain function. Despite making up only two percent of the body's weight, the brain utilizes more than 20% of your daily energy intake. Because the brain demands such high amounts of energy, the foods we eat each day have an effect on brain function. The ability to concentrate and focus comes from having an adequate, steady supply of energy to the brain in the form of glucose in our blood. Glucose is the most basic form of a carbohydrate and is the main fuel used by brain cells. Because brain neurons cannot store glucose, they depend on the bloodstream to deliver a constant supply of this precious fuel every single day. Therefore, it's important not to skip meals, like breakfast, and honor hunger cues throughout the day through sensible snacking so that you don't deprive your brain of the energy it needs to function at its best. Additionally, aim to include sources of carbohydrates, protein and healthy fats each time you eat for a winning fuel combination.

Now let's look at fueling at the micronutrients level – vitamins and minerals. Micronutrients are a term that's used to refer to the various vitamins and minerals present in food, such as calcium, iron, vitamin C and B complex vitamins. With the exception of vitamin D, micronutrients are not produced in the body and must be obtained through the diet. Each micronutrient serves a different purpose in human health, but they are all important to prevent disease and keep us functioning at our best. According to the Centers for Disease Control, research shows that deficits of specific nutrients, including vitamins A, B6, B12 and C, folate, iron, zinc and calcium, are associated with lower grades and higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness among students.

Upon taking a closer look at specific foods to promote brain function and academic success, there is strong evidence that the best "brain foods" to eat are the same ones that protect your heart, which include:

- **Leafy, green vegetables like kale, spinach, collards and broccoli are rich in vitamin K, lutein, folate and vitamin A, which can help improve memory.**
- **Fatty fish like salmon, trout and sardines are good sources of omega-3 fatty acids which play a powerful role in sharpening memory and protecting the brain from cognitive decline.**
- **Blackberries, blueberries and cherries are a rich source of anthocyanins and other flavonoids that may support memory function.**
- **Walnuts are well-known for their role in heart health due to their alpha-linolenic acid (an omega-3 fatty acid) content but they may also improve cognitive function.**

While there's no guarantee that these foods will make you ace your next final, over time they can support lifelong good brain function and health. It is also important to keep in mind that the body absorbs nutrients most efficiently when in overall good health. So in addition to making more nutritious food choices, remember to partake in other self-care practices as well. Including at least twenty minutes of exercise into your day can help increase blood flow to the brain and release endorphins to aid in stress management. Research has shown that students who are physically active tend to have better grades and cognitive performance (i.e. memory). Also, while it may seem impossible during finals, trying to sleep for seven to nine hours a night is key to consolidating memories. Fueling your body through these healthy habits, nutrition, physical activity and sleep can better prepare you for academic success.

— Lindsay Wilson, MS, RD, LD



## Dietitian's Dish

### Microwave Poached Egg and Spinach

Wilted Spinach  
Yield: 2 servings

#### Ingredients

- 1 cup spinach
- 2 pinches chili flakes
- 2 tbsp. water
- 2 pinches black pepper
- 2 pinches salt

#### Directions

1. Place spinach and water in a microwave safe bowl, add seasonings and mix.
2. Microwave for 1 minute then remove and stir to wilt spinach.
3. With a tong, place half of the spinach in the center of the plate and set aside.

Poached Egg  
Yield: 2 servings

#### Ingredients

- 2 large eggs
- 2 ½ tsp. vinegar
- 2 cups hot water
- 1 tbsp. Sriracha sauce

#### Directions

1. Add water and vinegar to a microwave safe bowl and stir.
2. Crack 2 eggs into the bowl.
3. Cover with 2 sheets of paper towel and microwave for 1 minute and 30 seconds.
4. With a slotted spoon, scoop the egg out and place on top of the bed of spinach.
5. Top with Sriracha sauce, to taste.

Have a tasty recipe to share? Submit your recipe to [dietitian@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:dietitian@austin.utexas.edu) for a chance to get featured in our next edition.



## Ask the Expert



**Q:** Is breakfast really the most important meal of the day?

**A:** There's widespread disagreement over whether breakfast reigns supreme in the hierarchy of meals, but there is evidence linking breakfast with academic achievement. There are research studies that suggest eating breakfast can help students do better in school by improving memory, attention, alertness, problem-solving ability and aid in processing complex visual displays. In addition, various studies have found additional benefits of starting your day with breakfast, including:

- Having a lower body mass index (BMI)
- Meeting recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption
- Having higher daily calcium and fiber intake

However, no single meal in a given day will make or break your overall health. Instead, think of breakfast as one cog in the wheel of wellness – it is important and has benefits, but should be included as part of an overall well-balanced diet.

Submit your nutrition-related questions to [dietitian@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:dietitian@austin.utexas.edu) and our experts may answer you in a future edition.

## Nourishing Noms



### Feature Food: Spinach

Leafy green vegetables, like spinach, are rich in brain-healthy nutrients like vitamin K, lutein, folate and beta carotene. Research suggests that these plant-based foods may help slow cognitive decline.



### Nutrition Facts

- Spinach is a good source of iron, potassium, riboflavin, vitamin B6, magnesium and copper.
- It is also high in vitamins A, C and K, as well as manganese.

### Selection & Storage

- Avoid spinach with dull or sunken leaves, yellow discoloration or spots.
- Choose fresh spinach that is crisp and in bright green bunches with no insect damage.
- Loosely wrap fresh spinach in damp paper towels then refrigerate in a plastic bag for use within 3-5 days.

### Fun Facts

- Spinach was referenced in 1390 in the first known English cookbook.
- Spinach traveled to the United States with European settlers in the 1700s and grew to popularity around 1806.
- But spinach wasn't pushed commercially until the 1920s, primarily by the Popeye the Sailor cartoon. Popeye's catchphrase included the line "I'm strong to the finish, 'cause I eat me spinach."



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