

Feed Your Head
by Maria Rabat

We don't typically associate dementia with the 20-something set, but according to researchers at the University of Michigan, that's when the early stages of memory loss and mental fatigue set in. During the last year, investigators examined more than 350 men and women between the ages of 20 and 90 using a wide variety of memory tests, and found that 20- and 30-year olds suffer a mental decline at the same rate as people in their 60s and 70s. The loss goes by unnoticed until it's great enough to affect everyday activities, such as can happen when a person reaches their 80s or 90s. Younger people are unaffected because they have "more mental capital than they need," reports lead researcher Denis Park, Ph.D. Decreases in mental abilities add up over time, and without notice, until your mid-60s, when the cumulative loss starts to affect memory and the processing of new information.

But there are some defensive measures. Researchers at Tufts University have discovered that the B vitamin folate enhances neurotransmitter activities, the chemicals that transmit messages between brain cells. In a survey of more than 1,200 people over age 60, scientists discovered an association between lower folate levels and memory difficulties associated with aging.

The Recommended Daily Allowance for folate is 400 micrograms. It can be found in fortified products like bread and pastas, whole grains, legumes and green leafy vegetables. Experts also recommend challenging yourself with mental exercises like puzzles and word games to stay sharp. "You can improve cognitive support as you age," says Park. "Learn a foreign language, take a computer class and become proficient in web design. It's important to stay current. If you think that learning how to burn a CD is just for kids, you're dead wrong. You must constantly feed your head with new concepts and ideas, or you'll wind up becoming quite limited." Scrabble, anyone?

Article by Maria Rabat from Vegetarian Times December 2001.
Copyright © Vegetarian Times. Reprinted with permission.