**Better Body, Better Brain**

K-State experts offer helpful tips to better the mind and body

By Jessica Jensen, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — What you eat, how much you move, how well you sleep and how you manage stress affects nearly every aspect of your well-being, including physical and mental health, said a pair of K-State family and consumer sciences experts.

K-State Research and Extension specialist Sharolyn Jackson and agent Lori Wuellner said the connection between the heart and brain shows that it can help lower the risk for stroke, dementia and other problems.

“In Kansas, 11.4% of people aged 45 and older have subjective cognitive decline (SCD), and other health issues come into play as 81% of those with SCD have at least one other chronic condition,” Jackson said.

Wuellner added, “Having poor mental health does not mean that you have a mental illness, but poor mental health can lead to mental illness.”

**The Brain/Gut Connection**

Wuellner listed nine research-based ways to help support digestive health and improve gut bacteria:

- Eat a diverse range of foods.
- Eat a lot of vegetables, fruits, beans and legumes.
- Eat fermented foods.
- Avoid artificial sweeteners.
- Eat prebiotic foods.
- For newborns, breastfeed at least six months.
• Eat whole grains.
• Consider more plant-based foods on your plate.
• Eat foods rich in polyphenols.

These foods will help gut health and could be good physically and mentally, according to Wuellner.

The MIND Eating Plan

The MIND diet is a hybrid between the Mediterranean and DASH diets and has 15 dietary components, including 10 “brain-healthy food groups.” Jackson urges people to eat:

• Green leafy vegetables (every day or at least six servings per week).
• Other vegetables (at least one serving/day).
• Nuts (every day or at least five times per week).
• Berries (at least two times a week).
• Beans (every other day or at least three servings per week).
• Whole grains (three servings per day).
• Fish (at least one serving per week).
• Poultry (at least two servings per week).
• Olive oil (use as main oil).
• Wine (no more than one serving per day).

She also includes foods to limit, including:

• Red meats (no more than three servings per week).
• Butter and stick margarine (less than one tablespoon per day).
• Cheese (less than one ounce per week).
• Sweets and sweetened beverages (no more than five servings per week).
• Fried and fast food (no more than one serving/meal per week).

“Exercise” Your Brain

“It has been stated, what is good for your heart is good for your brain, meaning your actions are either benefitting or harming your body, including your brain,” Jackson said.

In short, exercise helps the brain. “It is recommended that you include at least 150 minutes a week of moderate to vigorous activity,” Jackson said. “The more you can move throughout the day, the better off you will be.”

Manage Your Stress
Besides eating healthy and being active, managing stress is important. “Focus on what you can control, stick to routine as much as possible and connect with others and avoid isolation,” Jackson said.

Sleep

“A small percentage of adults actually get the recommended eight hours (of sleep) that are needed,” Wuellner said. Some helpful tips are:

- Establish a routine.
- Take a look around your sleep environment.
- Don’t drink alcohol and caffeine right before bed.
- Avoid spicy or high in fat foods three hours before bed.
- Be physically active during the day.
- Listen to what your body is telling you.

Challenge Your Brain

Jackson urges people to engage in “a variety of cognitive excises that keep you thinking clearly for a longer period of time.” She mentions that a variety of cognitive activities and repetition can help keep the brain active.

“It may seem like a lot, but you can make small improvements every day to improve your brain and gut health,” she said.

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Story by:
Jessica Jensen
jajensen@ksu.edu

More Information:
Sharolyn Jackson
sharolyn@ksu.edu

Lori Wuellner
lwuellner@ksu.edu