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VITAL SIGNS

Nutrition: 4 Vitamins That Strengthen Older Brains

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Higher blood levels of omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B, [vitamin C](#), [vitamin D](#) and vitamin E are associated with better mental functioning in the elderly, a new study has found.

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Researchers measured blood levels of these nutrients in 104 men and women, whose average age was 87. The scientists also performed brain scans to determine brain volume and administered six commonly used tests of mental functioning. The study is in the Jan. 24 issue of *Neurology*.

After controlling for age, sex, [blood pressure](#), body mass index and other factors, the researchers found that [people with the highest blood levels of the four vitamins scored higher on the cognitive tests and had larger brain volume](#) than those with the lowest levels.

Omega-3 levels were linked to better cognitive functioning and to healthier blood vessels in the brain, but not to higher brain volume, which suggests that these beneficial fats may improve cognition by a different means.

Higher blood levels of [trans fats](#), on the other hand, were significantly associated with impaired mental ability and smaller brain volume.

The lead author, Gene L. Bowman, a researcher in neurology at Oregon Health and Science University, said that the study could not determine whether taking supplements of these nutrients would decrease the risk for [dementia](#). But he added: "What's the harm in eating healthier? Fish, fruits, vegetables all have these nutrients, and staying away from trans fats is one key thing you can do."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 5, 2012

Because of an editing error, a report in the Vital Signs column on Tuesday about vitamins associated with better mental functioning in the elderly misstated the credentials of Gene L. Bowman, the lead author of a study that established the associations. Dr. Bowman is a researcher in neurology at Oregon Health and Science University; he is not a neurologist there.