

The Telegraph

What a brain expert does daily to ward off dementia

• Barbara Sahakian

Hattie Garlick Mon, February 6, 2023 at 11:00 PM PST · 5 min read

In this article: Barbara Sahakian Neuropsychologist



Sahakian says she has reduced her coffee since a study published in the journal Cerebral Cortex last year showed it was associated with reduced grey matter in the cerebral cortex - David Rose

Barbara Sahakian, an expert in grey matter from the University of Cambridge, describes the lifestyle habits she employs to keep brain deterioration at bay.

Breakfast

I like getting up early when it is quiet and listening to the birdsong while I drink my coffee.

I used to drink more coffee, but have cut down my intake since our study, published in the journal Cerebral Cortex last year, showed that coffee was associated with reduced grey matter in the cerebral cortex.

Our findings also highlighted the importance of a “cereal” breakfast for reducing the risk of Alzheimer’s disease. So, I have muesli cereal, with no added sugar, for breakfast every day.

Learning

Recently, I co-wrote an article for The Lancet called “Use It or Lose It”. In essence, in order to keep your brain functioning at its best, you need to drive its neural networks through cognitive activities, including learning new things. We hear a lot about how learning a language or musical instrument can build cognitive reserve but actually learning anything new will have benefits. Different areas of the brain will be activated during different kinds of learning, be it music, a foreign language or motor skills such as cycling.

Fortunately, I keep my mind active through my research work and teaching.

I learn a lot when I travel, too. I like to read about the cities I’m staying in, as well as their history and culture. I’ll visit art, history, textile and fashion museums. When I was in Chengdu, I was taken to see the bronze masks discussed so brilliantly on TV by Simon Schama, and I’m looking forward to seeing the exhibition “Hallyu! The Korean Wave” at the Victoria and Albert Museum this April.

Lunch

I’ll often have tuna fish sandwiches or zero per cent fat yoghurt and fruit. Oily fish provides omega-3 fatty acids which have anti-inflammatory and neuroprotective effects. I always have several different kinds of fruit in the house, my favourite being blueberry. Oxidative stress has been identified as a major factor in diseases including Alzheimer’s, and these berries are high in antioxidants that prevent oxidative damage to cells.

Meanwhile, Vitamin C, which is found in most citrus fruits, is thought to have a therapeutic role in a number of diseases, including ischemic stroke, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease.

Exercise



I get out every day for a brisk, one hour walk. Exercising is vital for your physical health, brain health, cognition and mood. It actually increases neurogenesis in the brain (the creation of new brain cells), including in the hippocampus, which is an important area involved in learning and memory.

When I walk, I usually practise mindfulness and stay in the moment, listening to birds and appreciating the natural world around me. If I have a difficult problem to solve, I often find my mind is clearer and my decision-making improved after a fast, long walk. The key is to do exercise that you enjoy, so you will be sure to stick with it.

Socialising

Our study, published in Neurology last year, showed that socially isolated individuals had a higher risk of developing dementia. Keeping socially connected is good for your brain, cognition, wellbeing and mental health, so it's really important to keep in touch with family and friends. I meet mine at restaurants, theatres and museums or, on sunny days, just to go on long walks together.

Supper

For dinner I often have chicken and dark green vegetables, which are important for brain health, due to the protective effects of vitamin K and other nutrients. I like Indian-style vegetables and South Korean kimchi rice.

Sleep

Our study, published in Nature Aging in 2022, showed that seven hours of sleep is ideal in middle and old age, for cognition and mental health. The brain recharges itself and stores memories during sleep, as well as removing toxic waste by-products and boosting the immune system. Sleeping four hours or less increases your risk of death, but sleeping more than seven probably means that you have had poor quality or disrupted sleep. So I try to get those seven hours each night.

It is important to be relaxed and not stressed when you get into bed, so I try to not work or watch thrillers immediately before sleep. I like reading, but if my work has already required me to read for much of the day, then I'll usually relax and watch something light on TV - a comedy or romantic comedy.

To some extent, how much screen time is beneficial or detrimental to your brain will depend on what you are watching. For example, some nature or history programs can be very educational, but there's no harm in switching off occasionally.

At bedtime I make sure my bedroom is dark and quiet, and the room temperature is right for me and my bed comfortable. It also helps, sometimes, to think of a relaxing event when falling asleep. I might drift off thinking of how I felt when lying on a beautiful beach in the sun, watching the ocean and listening to the sound of the waves.