

FEATURES



Food for (better)

thought

[HEALTH]

Scientists are amassing research on how what we put into our bodies affects the health of our brains

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Thinking about what to eat today? Perhaps you should consider which foods and beverages might actually help you think.

While the majority of nutrition studies have focused on our hearts, bones and waistlines, a thoughtful bunch of scientists are amassing research on how what we put into our bodies affects the health of our brains.

Brain cells like all cells start needing nutrition as soon as they're created; that's why there's so much emphasis on good nutrition during pregnancy and early childhood to build healthy bodies and brains. More research is being done on how adult nutrition can affect cognitive function — the level at which the brain is able to manage and use available information for activities of daily life.

So whether you're choosing breakfast foods to keep you alert during an early morning business meeting or wanting an afternoon snack to boost concentration powers, here's a roundup of food news to feed your mind.

Don't forget folate. Folate is found in orange juice, green vegetables, cantaloupe and whole-grain foods, including those enriched with folic acid such as breads, cereals, pasta and rice. Shown to improve alertness in adults, the B vitamin folate is critical in early pregnancy to prevent spinal cord birth defects and may be key in forming the brain's memory cells. Research being done at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston shows that high blood folate levels help keep homocysteine levels in check. That's a good thing because high homocysteine levels are associated with increased risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. So grabbing an orange juice and whole-grain bagel may be a time-saving no-brainer breakfast on the go, but it's really good for your brain.



Brain cells crave choline. Found in egg yolks, peanuts, soybeans and flaxseeds, the nutrient choline helps support the brain's messenger service, called neurotransmitters. It's also linked to new memory cell production. But according to Boston-based nutrition consultant and registered dietitian Elizabeth Ward, who presented findings at the American Dietetic Association's 2008 Food and Nutrition Conference in Chicago, "It's a nutrient that's frequently underconsumed by those who need it most. In fact, fewer than 10 percent of older children, men and women meet the recommended adequate intake for choline." Ward says one egg, which contains 125mg of choline, can help close the gap.



Up your anti-oxidants. It's hard to avoid health messages about antioxidants these days. Foods from pomegranates to prunes boast about their high levels of those disease-fighting biochemicals, and according to nutrition researchers at Tufts University they help fight off oxidative stress on our brains to help protect cognitive function. So throw some blueberries in your yogurt for breakfast and order a spinach salad for lunch for your body and your mind.



Pay attention with tea. Exciting new research on drinking tea focuses on its effect to calm us down so we can concentrate better on the task at hand. John Foxe, professor of neuroscience, biology and psychology at City College of the City University of New York, found that theanine — an amino acid in the tea plant — increases alpha brain-wave activity, which induces a calmer, yet more alert, state of mind. Theanine is found in green, black and oolong teas.

Water for the brain. If your brain feels a bit fuzzy or you feel irritability coming on, you might just be thirsty. Dehydration can make you feel listless, lethargic and contribute to concentration problems. Maybe you don't need more caffeine to plow through the rest of the afternoon. Make sure to drink water or other thirst-quenching drinks throughout the day. The water in fresh fruit and vegetable snacks help hydrate, too.

[TECHNOLOGY]

Tech gifts for a frugal holiday season

Straitened times don't have to turn gift givers into Scrooges this Christmas

BY JAY DOUGHERTY
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The holiday season is fast approaching in many parts of the world, which means gift givers will soon be compiling their shopping lists. This year, though, the emphasis is likely to be on frugality — thanks to economies around the world that are weak and getting weaker. But never fear: Tech gifts are available in all price categories, and less expensive does not have to mean less interesting or less fun. In fact, searching for low-priced tech products that will make a big impact as gifts just might lead you to look at products that are too often overlooked. Read on for some ideas.

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT

The market for tech accessories — everything from notebook computer stands to USB flash drives — is huge. There's good reason, too: The little add-ons often add up to greater productivity or more fun. That's good news for frugal gift givers because tech accessories are often inexpensive.

Almost every computer user can benefit from a wide variety of low-cost accessories that few go out and buy themselves. CD and DVD sleeves or jewel cases, for instance, are almost universally in demand, since an unprotected writable CD or DVD is almost destined to be scratched beyond repair. Similarly, a CD or DVD carrying case may come in handy — and

is similarly priced.

Staying on the theme of protection, protective keyboard covers can keep bread crumbs and drinks from fouling up a keyboard. LCD cleaning kits, too, will always come in handy — and they'll prevent your computer-using gift recipient from resorting to cleaning an LCD with potentially harmful chemicals or paper towels that can leave scratches. Rosewill makes a good LCD cleaning kit, which comes with an ample amount of liquid as well as a soft foam applicator, for under US\$30.

Notebook computer users can often benefit from little gadgets that make computing on the road more comfortable — or more fun. In the more comfortable category, consider giving a wireless notebook mouse. Microsoft's Notebook Optical Mouse 3000, for example, is small, comfortable, and can be found for as little as US\$15 online. For just a bit more, you can give a notebook user the gift of live images with a Webcam designed to clip onto a laptop's screen. Logitech's QuickCam for Notebooks retails for just under US\$30 online, and the Microsoft LifeCam NX costs just a couple of US dollars more. Both make Web chats via notebook a reality.



The Lexar 1GB Jump drive
PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

For portable storage, USB flash drives have been a great idea for several years, and these tiny devices have only gotten larger in capacity and cheaper in price — great for cost-saving gifts. One gigabyte models are widely available online for US\$5 — often even less — and 2 gigabyte flash drives are just a couple of US dollars more.

Also, subscriptions to technology magazines or subscription-only tech Web sites are a sure-fire hit for tech buffs — and subscriptions are inexpensive. Buy a single issue for wrapping, or a gift card, and include a note about the subscription.

For kids, games for computers or gaming consoles are always a hit. A stroll through your local computer store's gaming section or at a popular online retailer will tell you what's hot this year for particular age groups. Games generally run from US\$40 to US\$60, but game compilations of older titles are also packed with fun and can be purchased for much, much less.

Novelty tech gadgets, too, can be fun, useful, and inexpensive. Take, for example, a keychain camera from Digital Blue (www.digible.com). The tiny device has 16 megabytes of internal memory and can hold about 20 pictures — as well as your keys. It comes with a USB cable for downloading your pictures — and it retails for only US\$20.

THE OTHER IPODS

Portable media players are always popular, and in this market, Apple's iPod and Nano rule, thanks to Apple's marketing machine. You end up paying for that marketing, of course, in the price of Apple's products — which is not insignificant. The good news: There are very competent — and inexpensive — alternatives to the iPod, and some of them offer features

Imation's USB Flash Wristband

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



that you just can't find on an iPod itself.

Take, for example, the Philips GoGear player, a keychain-sized player with 2 gigs of memory that sells for around US\$25. Or look at Creative's Zen Stone or SanDisk's Sansa series of colorful MP3 players. The 2 gigabyte models have good sound, ample space for storing music files, and clip easily to a belt for convenience.

DIGITAL CAMERAS AND CAMCORDERS

Don't get sucked in to the megapixel war — and consequently to high prices — when looking at digital cameras as gifts. The more megapixels a camera has, the more it will cost. But more megapixels don't necessarily translate into better pictures. They do mean the ability to print larger photographs, but most people never print photos larger than those they used to get from the local photo store. And for those, even the lowest megapixel camera on the market today is overkill.

Instead, look for features that are likely to make the camera more useful to your gift recipient. Small size, image stabilization, auto ISO, a large zoom range, and an automatic lens cover are nice features — and all are available

in cameras from Canon, Nikon, and Olympus for around US\$100.

Also, for the digital camera owner on your gift-giving list, there are plenty of useful accessories that don't cost much. Flash memory cards are the digital equivalent of a roll of film — except they never wear out. Four gigabyte flash cards go for as little as US\$10 and provide space for hundreds of high-resolution images. Just be sure to get the proper format of flash card for your recipient's camera.

Inexpensive camcorders are also a sure-fire hit, especially for teens and young families. Thanks to the advent of high-definition camcorders, the "standard definition" camcorders have come way down in price but still produce usable videos. Creative produces a series of Vado camcorders that come with enough built-in memory to hold 60 minutes of best-quality video. They retail for under US\$90. For just a few US dollars more, the popular Flip VGA camcorders can hold the same amount of high-quality video and come with a built-in USB cord. Both are small enough to fit easily in a pocket or purse.

SAVE GAS

Gasoline prices have come down, but it's far from free. You can save a bundle on your holiday shopping this year by watching for the inevitable free shipping deals that will surface at the major online retailers, including Amazon.com. This year, retailers will be desperate to meet their sales projections, and one way they'll try to do it is by offering free shipping. So you can save money on the gas you would otherwise pay to shop at a local store and have the convenience of home delivery as well.