Crunch Time: Eating Healthy During Finals

By Lauren Ross

I know, I've been there too: propped up in bed until 3 AM with a text book so that you lose no waking second of studying; setting your alarm for 7:00 so that you can beat the crowd and snag a cubicle in the library for maximum studying efficiency; finally mastering the different reactions of carboxylic acid derivatives after two hours and celebrating the joyous occasion with a coveted pee break (it's the little things in life, really). I'll admit, finals is a time of incredible stress, but it's imperative not to let all that knowledge cramming turn into cramming junk food down your throat, or worse yet: skipping meals.

Brain Food

Anyone can do a Google search for “brain food” and come up with several articles claiming to have found foods that could turn Frankenstein into Einstein. These days everyone claims to be a health expert, and sometimes there can be a bit of truth to some of the claims. Most people know that coffee is a stimulant, and can help with staying up late. And it's true that omega-3 fatty acids like those in salmon have been linked with improved memory function. However, the correlation has been seen in elderly people with Alzheimer's disease, not college students trying to get an A in microbiology(1)!

So here are the facts: food is necessary for the brain to function properly. Most people think of the brain as a lump of wrinkly gray mush that magically shoots out signals and thoughts without any input whatsoever. However, just because your brain doesn't move doesn't mean that it needs no energy. In fact, it needs quite a lot! Your brain functions on a constant supply of glucose (about 450 calories' worth per day, which is almost 5 grams of glucose per hour)(2). If there is a lack of glucose, the brain begins to get sluggish. If you've ever gone straight from the gym to class, you know what this is like – concentrating can be hard, as can comprehension, which are exactly the skills required for studying, test taking, and paper writing. Without a supply of glucose from food, the body has to break down its glycogen stores, which takes time and energy. When glycogen stores are depleted, the body turns to alternate fuel sources that are far less efficient.
In order to keep the brain functioning perfectly during high-stress times like finals, it pays to plan ahead. It is essential to eat breakfast, which is often difficult for college students who are commonly not hungry right after waking up. Having a good, substantial breakfast that supplies about 500 calories is essential. You should shoot for something that supplies both fiber, which will get you full now, and protein, which will keep you full later. Many people complain of not being hungry when they first wake up, or not having time for breakfast, but the truth is that your body needs it!

There are many quick and easy breakfasts that are cheap and easy to prepare on the run. Peanut butter toast or a peanut butter sandwich can be topped with banana or apple for a quick, tasty breakfast. Oatmeal takes just a few minutes in the microwave, and can be mixed with nuts and any kind of fruit – apple, raisins, or dried cranberries. If you're really in a rush, put the water on to boil while you brush your teeth and pour it into a thermos or jar with the other raw materials to take with you to the library – by the time you get there it will be perfect! Yogurt and a piece of fruit is also a great portable option, just pick a low-fat yogurt, and go Greek for extra protein. Packing a lower sugar meal replacement or granola bar to eat while going over notes or waiting for an exam to start is another good idea and can get those gears turning. For those who have difficulty eating in the morning, instant breakfast shakes or smoothies made with fruit and low-fat milk or yogurt can be found in most grocery stores and are a great way to go, but don't always offer the benefits of fiber that other options do.

**Overload**

It can be comforting in times of stress to reach for our favorite foods. Although it is not advisable to get into the habit of rewarding yourself with food, it's a fact of life. It's important, when the urge strikes, to keep these comfort foods in check and make sure to use them more as treats when you've accomplished something, instead of letting them become your meal. “Everything in moderation” - it's a mantra repeated by Buddhists and dietitians alike. Truly, every kind of food can fit into a healthy diet, as long as it is done sensibly. When you know you're planning to get a cookie after your exam, make sure to eat a healthy lunch and skip dessert. Most importantly, anticipating those comfort food cravings can allow you to tailor
snacks to avoid overindulgences. The key for planning study snacks is to make them work for you: they should satisfy your cravings while helping to create a well-rounded diet.

Picture this: it's one of those late nights at the library, when all you really want is chocolate. You've got two dollars left on your YCMP swipe after asking for a large coffee, and the candy bars at the Procrastination Station are staring you down. It's hard to say no, but you know you've got a delicious chocolaty and healthy (!) snack waiting downstairs in your cubicle. Smart substitutions for those typical high-calorie, high-fat foods really do exist! If what you’re craving is chocolate, try chocolate rice cakes, low-fat chocolate milk, or a lower-sugar granola bar with chocolate chips in it and some dietary fiber. If salty snacks are more to your liking, popcorn might be a good choice – a serving size is 3 cups! Lightly salted nuts can also be a great nutritious fix, but the serving size should be watched, as mindlessly eating nuts can easily add up to hundreds of unnecessary calories.

For people who love crunchy foods, fresh vegetables like carrots and cauliflower work well, and are especially tasty with hummus. For those who crave sweets, fresh fruit, low-fat flavored yogurts, or sugar free Jello may be the way to go.

**Putting it Together**

So, you cannot *not* eat during finals, but you shouldn’t overeat either. So how does one find a happy medium? The most important lesson, and the one I’ve repeated several times, is to plan ahead. Anticipate what you'll need: you’re an expert on your own habits. If you know that you always skip breakfast but you cherish the warmth of your morning coffee, taking hot oatmeal in a thermos to campus to eat while you study will warm you up and get you going. If none of the suggestions here sound good to you, then go check out the grocery store! If you've gotten this far in the year, and you've read this article, you probably have enough knowledge to determine what's a healthy choice and what's not. Good luck!

**References:**