Loss of memory is accepted as being just part of the ageing process. However, even young people are finding that, with everyday stress and the information overload accompanying today's busy lifestyle, their memories are also taking a toll.

Here are seven ways to enhance your memory, whether you are young or old.

**7 Steps to Having a Better Memory**

BY WENDY ROSENFELDT

**Eat Fresh Fruit and Veggies**

What we eat and drink affects our mind and brain functioning. It is a common experience that if we drink a few alcoholic drinks in the middle of the day, the afternoon can become a bit of a daze, whereas a cup of coffee is often employed to overcome the mid-afternoon slump. While cold, heavy foods such as yoghurt and ice cream tend to make us feel mentally sluggish, munching on an apple can make us feel more alert.

Long term, eating fresh, natural foods has a definite benefit for memory and the entire brain. Fresh fruit and vegetables contain synergistic combinations of phytochemicals that have been found to boost memory function. Research shows that the biologically active compounds occurring naturally in plants have a positive effect on brain functioning. Walnuts, cashews, sunflower seeds and almonds are particularly powerful memory aids. Walnuts, which are high in polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids, are good for the brain and have been found to improve brain development in infants. Blueberries contain among the highest level of antioxidants and are also an important ingredient in your memory-boosting diet.

**Enliven Your Memory with Herbs**

Memory-enlivening phytochemicals are even more concentrated in herbs. The ability of Alzheimer's patients to remember improved significantly when turmeric was added to their diet. Turmeric's popularity in India may account for their very low rate of Alzheimer's cases.

Three of the most powerful brain-boosting Ayurvedic herbs are Shankpushpi (aloeedew), Brahmi (bacopa) and Gotu kola (Indian pennywort). Shankpushpi is considered the very best herb for overall brain and mind support. It boosts mental power and feelings of bliss, enhances memory, promotes clear thinking, soothes the mind and improves overall tolerance to mental stress.

Brahmi is very balancing to the mind. It has specific hormonal-balancing effects in women, so it is particularly useful in menopause. Scientific studies have shown that it can enhance memory and learning ability, provide antioxidant support for the brain and reduce the negative effects of drugs (like the anti-seizure drug Phenytoin) on mental ability. Gotu kola is the most effective herb at enhancing memory power. It contains Asiatic acid, a potent inhibitor of the amyloid plaque formation seen in Alzheimer's disease.

Herbs assist in improving coordination between learning, retention and long-term memory. The tendency of modern researchers and pharmaceutical companies to extract the active ingredient and put it in a pill form is inferior to eating the whole plant. Studies show that herbs, fruits and vegetables contain synergistic combinations of phytochemicals that are of great benefit to the body. A single carrot contains over 100 phytochemicals which would not be available in a pill that contained only isolated beta-carotene.

**Eat Good Fats**

Over the past 20 years or so, fat has gained a bad reputation. In fact, a totally fat-free diet is damaging to the brain. Fat is necessary for memory to function. It is important to eat high quality fats as the brain can only use the most intelligent, nutrition-rich fats, rich in omega-3 fatty acids and other good fats. Ghee provides nourishment to the mind and memory.

Cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil is a healthy mono-unsaturated fat that also aids in memory functioning. Heating oil to high temperatures causes it to oxidise and destroys its beneficial qualities. Therefore olive oil is best added to food after it has been cooked. It is desirable to avoid the hydrogenated fats found in most packaged foods. Polyunsaturated fats such as corn or safflower oil are unstable, oxidise readily and create excessive free radicals.

**Get a Good Night's Sleep**

Replacing the late night cram with a good night's sleep before exams has been found to produce better results. This is because the brain is actually working its hardest while you are asleep. It is rehearsing, rehearsing new information and repairing and storing new files (a bit like computer hard-disk defragmentation). One study showed that students who slept well the night before an exam significantly outperformed the students who stayed awake half the night studying. Researchers at Harvard University suggest that after learning a new skill it is best to sleep on it. This allows the brain to transfer new skills and information into permanent memory banks.

**Exercise and Breathe Deeply**

Exercise increases the body's metabolic rate and helps to oxygenate the brain and sharpen the memory. It is best to exercise regularly and in moderation. Walking, gentle swimming and yoga are ideal activities to clear the mental fog without exhausting the physiology. Yoga is very effective for the mind as the postures direct blood to the brain and also cleanse the brain cells and organs of toxins, while increasing body-mind coordination.

**Keep Mentally Active, but not Over-Stimulated**

As with any organ in the body, if you don't use it, it becomes weaker. If your mind is never stimulated, the brain is not encouraged to maintain or create neuronal pathways which link the different parts of the brain. Reading a book, memorising information, learning new knowledge (like a language or a musical instrument) or just doing a crossword stimulates the brain and fosters your memory skills.

Decline in memory is also due to improper use of the mind. If your mind is always busy and is never allowed time to process what has been taken in, it can become stressed and fatigued. Mental and emotional stress stimulates secretion of the stress hormone, cortisol. Produced in the adrenal glands, cortisol increases alertness and provides quick energy to the muscles for the fight-or-flight response needed in dangerous situations. However, when chronically secreted in response to the endless stress of daily life, cortisol can damage the hippocampus, an important structure in the brain involved with memory function. Over time, too much cortisol secretion can result in permanent memory decline.

**Meditation**

Meditation is also of great benefit to the brain as it reduces stress, thus limiting the secretion of cortisol. Transcendental Meditation (TM) has been shown to improve overall brain functioning by reducing stress and enlivening the brain in total. Under stress the body goes into a fight-or-flight response, sending adrenaline to certain areas while suppressing the functions of less important areas.

Likewise, during periods of stress, the prefrontal cortex of the brain—which is responsible for moral reasoning—is bypassed, leaving the emotionally driven limbic system to run the brain. A stressed brain makes short-sighted decisions that are often reactive and overly emotional. In times of stress we forget about the long-term or bigger picture and, instead, tend to focus on just getting through the day. During Transcendental Meditation there is increased blood flow to the brain, greater integration of brain functioning and increased use of hidden reserves. This translates into improvements in IQ, better memory and faster recovery from stress.

So the next time an exam approaches or you are organising a big event, don't stress, just eat well, stay rested, exercise regularly, meditate and enjoy the amazing ability of your mind.

Wendy Rosenfeldt, BA, Dip Health, MVHEC, is a Maharishi Vedic health educator. For information on seminars, consultations or the Maharishi Vedic approach to health including Ayurveda or Transcendental Meditation, call Wendy Rosenfeldt on 07 5499 9580 or 0438 507 188. To locate your nearest Maharishi Vedic Health Centre, visit www.maharishivedichealth.org