The MIND Diet Slows the Physical Aging of the Brain Itself

5 MIN READ

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New study reveals what your dinner plate is doing to your brain architecture

You may have heard that the brain shrinks as we age. Neurons thin out. Memory gets a little fuzzy. We leave the room and forget why. What we haven't had, until now, is a decade of MRI scans showing that what you eat can measurably slow that process, not just in cognitive test scores, but in the actual physical structure of your brain.

A new study published this month in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* followed 1,647 adults from the Framingham Heart Study Offspring cohort (average age 60, no dementia or stroke at the start) for 12 years. The people in the study had repeated MRI brain scans and answered validated dietary questionnaires across that stretch. What the researchers found is notable.

People who more closely followed the MIND diet showed significantly slower grey matter loss and slower enlargement of the brain's ventricles, **two well-established structural markers of brain aging**. "People who adhered more closely to the MIND diet seemed to show slower structural brain ageing over about 12 years of follow-up," said senior author Changzheng Yuan, a research professor at Zhejiang University School of Medicine and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "In particular, they had slower loss of grey matter, which is the part of the brain that contains many of the nerve cells involved in memory, thinking, and decision-making."

Researchers Watched Brains Change

for 12 Years

You've probably seen headlines about the MIND diet before. Most of the research behind them had a design limitation worth knowing: it was cross-sectional, meaning a single snapshot in time. This study is longitudinal, the same people, the same brains, scanned repeatedly over more than a decade. That's harder to do, more expensive, and far more informative about what's actually happening over time rather than what correlates with what at one moment.

The numbers are specific. Every three-point increase in MIND diet score was associated with 20% less age-related grey matter decline, the equivalent of roughly 2.5 years of slower brain aging over the study period. And also associated with an 8% slower ventricular expansion, or about one additional year of structural protection.

A Quick Anatomy Note: Grey matter is the outer layer of your brain, dense with neurons, synapses, and dendrites. It's where memory, learning, and decision-making live. As we age, it naturally thins. Ventricles are the fluid-filled spaces inside the brain, and as Yuan put it, they "tend to expand as brain tissue shrinks with age." Slower ventricular enlargement means less tissue loss. Both markers showed measurable differences based on diet, sustained across 12 years.

What is the MIND Diet Exactly?

The MIND diet (Mediterranean–DASH Diet Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay) was designed specifically for brain health, combining elements of the Mediterranean and DASH diets with particular emphasis on foods with evidence for neuroprotection. It was **first published in 2015**. The diet uses a **0–15 scoring system** based on 15 food categories: 10 encouraged groups (leafy greens, other vegetables, nuts, berries, beans, whole grains, fish, poultry, olive oil, and wine in moderation) and 5 to limit (red meat, butter and margarine, cheese, pastries and

sweets, and fried or fast food).

Berries and poultry are particularly strong contributors in this study, linked to slower ventricular growth and less grey matter loss. Their antioxidant and high-quality protein profiles may reduce oxidative stress and protect neurons from damage, the authors suggest. Sweets and fried foods, meanwhile, were associated with faster hippocampal atrophy (the memory center of the brain) which tracks with what we know about **advanced glycation end-products** and neuroinflammation.

Whole Grains Flagged, Cheese Cleared: The Anomalies Worth Understanding

Two anomalies in the data are worth naming because they'll likely come up. Higher whole grain intake was associated with some unfavorable brain changes in this study. Yuan addressed this directly: what counted as "whole grain" in the food questionnaires from the 1990s may not meet today's standards for genuinely healthy whole grain foods. It shouldn't be read as evidence against whole grains. Cheese showed the opposite pattern, linked to slower grey matter loss, which contradicts the diet's recommendation to limit it. Both findings are exploratory, not yet explained, and the authors flag them clearly. Co-author Hui Chen offered the broader frame: "Foods are consumed together, and their combined effects may be more important than the contribution of one food alone."

The benefits were also strongest in people over 60 and in those who were more physically active, suggesting diet works best as part of a broader lifestyle, not as a standalone intervention.

Try This: See How Well Your Diet Is Protecting Your Brain

The **MIND diet** scores you across 15 food categories, 15 points possible. For each

one, give yourself 1 point if you meet the target, 0.5 if you're close but not quite there, and 0 if you're not there yet. Grab a pen, go down the list, and jot your number beside each line.

The median score in the study's cohort was 6.8, and every three-point increase above that was linked to measurable structural brain protection. So if you land at a 6, getting to a 9 is a meaningful target, and you don't have to overhaul everything to get there. The strongest individual signals were berries and poultry, so if you're not sure where to start, start there.

Give yourself a point for eating more of these:

- Whole grains: 3+ servings a day
- Vegetables (non-leafy): 1+ serving a day
- Green leafy vegetables: 6+ servings a week
- Nuts: 5+ servings a week
- Beans: 4+ meals a week
- Berries: 2+ servings a week
- Poultry: 2+ meals a week
- Fish: 1+ meal a week
- Olive oil as your primary added fat
- Wine: up to 1 glass a day (optional. If you don't drink, score yourself out of 14)

Give yourself a point for keeping these low:

- Pastries and sweets: fewer than 5 servings a week
- Red meat: fewer than 4 servings a week
- Cheese: fewer than 1 serving a week

- Fried foods: fewer than 1 serving a week
- Butter or stick margarine: less than 1 tablespoon a day

Now add up all 15 for your total. Under 6.8, you've got room to climb. Above it, you're already in protective territory, and every few points buys you more. The study's strongest individual signals were berries and poultry, so those are worth starting with those if you're not sure where to begin.

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