

Superb Herbs for a Better Brain

Looking for natural ways to give your brain a healthy boost? Active compounds in herbs can provide a sense of calm, boost energy to fight fogginess, and even combat destructive inflammation. Check out some of these super brainy herbs below to find out how they can support your goals!

Bacopa: Be Calm & Sharpen Your Senses

Bacopa monnieri, or “Brahmi” in Ayurvedic medicine, is a flowering plant revered for its ability to sharpen the mind and intellect.ⁱ This is likely due to bacopa’s impressive modulatory effects on neurotransmitters such as GABA, acetylcholine, and dopamine, which are critical for achieving a sense of calm, processing information, and experiencing feelings of joy and motivation, respectively.^{ii iii iv} Through neurotransmitter modulation, liquid extracts of bacopa improved scores of social behaviors and learning in a rat model for autism and ameliorated severity of seizures in epileptic mice.^{v vi vii} Bacopa can be found in either liquid tincture or in a dried capsule. The main active compounds that yield many of bacopa’s benefits are called bacosides (A & B). Look for a product that is standardized to at least 20% bacosides and try 200 – 400 mg in divided doses for adults. Best results may be seen with eight to twelve weeks of use.^{viii ix}

Rosemary Essential Oil Aromatherapy: Wake up!

Rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) is a woody herb with an energizing scent that can boost focus and wakefulness when the essential oil is used in aromatherapy.^x Volatile compounds like α -pinene and 1,8-cineole found in rosemary oil may be responsible for its stimulating effect when inhaled. One study observing the effect of rosemary essential oil on mood found that participants reported feeling “fresher”, were more active, and showed measurable increases in parameters of physical alertness after inhalation.^{xi} Another study performed on nurses who worked the night shift found that when they used drops of rosemary essential oil in their masks, they had higher scores of alertness with corresponding lower indications of sleepiness.^{xii} Try sniffing rosemary essential oil to beat an afternoon haze and maintain mental clarity.^{xiii} Do not consume rosemary essential oils as these are intended for aromatherapy or diluted with a carrier oil for topical use.

Holy Basil (Tulsi): Fight Stress

Holy basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* or *Ocimum sanctum*), also known as Tulsi, is an aromatic plant indigenous to India that shines as an *adaptogen*—a plant that helps the body adapt to various stressors.^{xiv} In traditional Eastern medicine, holy basil has been used for a variety of ailments including headaches and anxiety.^{xv} In a 2008 trial with 150 human participants, 400 mg encapsulated holy basil taken three times daily for six weeks significantly reduced stress-related symptoms including fatigue, sleep disturbances, and forgetfulness.^{xvi} Another human study involving 35 adults diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder saw improvements in their condition after using holy basil at 500 mg twice daily for eight weeks.^{xvii} By interacting with our brain’s stress feedback system, holy basil is a great choice for those seeking calm moods and resilience. Try 500 mg of encapsulated holy basil twice daily with meals for general support.^{xviii}

Turmeric: Tame Inflammation

It is well-established that low-grade, chronic inflammation can lead to conditions like Alzheimer's, dementia, and depression.^{xxix} Thankfully, powerful herbs like turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) and its most notable compound, curcumin, have been studied in over 12,500 peer-reviewed articles describing its anti-inflammatory benefits.^{xx} In one rat study, anxiety- and depression-like behaviors that had been induced by a common inflammatory compound were reduced by administration of curcumin for fourteen days. This was due to curcumin's antioxidant action, which helped to fortify the blood-brain barrier.^{xxi} Since curcumin has poor bioavailability on its own, choosing turmeric supplements that contain enhanced curcumin is important for maximizing its effects. Look for patented forms, such as Meriva®, BCM-95®, or turmeric standardized to 95% curcuminoids paired with piperine (black pepper extract) for optimal absorption. Try 500-1,000 mg daily in one of the above-mentioned forms.^{xxii}

Sage: Supercharge Your Brain Cells

Salvia officinalis, commonly known as sage, is loaded with neuroprotective compounds. Some of these compounds, such as rosmarinic acid, have shown modulatory effects on neurotrophins—regulators of brain cell growth, function, and plasticity.^{xxiii} One prominent neurotrophin called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), was shown in a review of studies to be affected positively by various compounds extracted from sage.^{xxiv} Boosting BDNF can have profound benefits for building new, more complex brain cells!^{xxv} In the case of sage extracts, some human studies on both young and aging adults have shown improvements in mood, attention, and memory with single dose administration. These studies were using between 300-600 mg dried sage in capsule form.^{xxvi}

Skullcap: Soothe Your Mind

American skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*) is a purple-flowered herb that is considered a nerve—a plant used to calm nerves and support healthy sleep.^{xxvii} Although more clinical research is needed, skullcap has been traditionally used for hundreds of years for easing mental and physical tension. Skullcap contains the powerful free radical scavenger, baicalin, which has been reported to bind to receptors in our brain known to promote feelings of relaxation and serenity.^{xxviii} Skullcap taken in combination with some other nervines like passionflower may help to address sleeplessness through anxiolytic effects.^{xxix xxx} Try 400 mg of dried skullcap in capsule-form, up to three times daily.^{xxxi}

Green Tea: Keep Focused

True tea varieties such as black, green, and oolong all come from the leaves of the same plant, *Camellia sinensis*. Green tea comes from the unfermented version of the *Camellia sinensis* leaf, retaining high levels of antioxidants, like epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), a polyphenol with neuroprotective benefits.^{xxxii} Green tea extracts made from dried leaves also contain caffeine, a well-known enhancer of brain performance.^{xxxiii} To prevent “the jitters” from caffeine, green tea comes equipped with the amino acid theanine, which has been shown to promote alpha-waves in the brain, an indicator of “wakeful relaxation”.^{xxxiv} When choosing green tea supplements, look for ones that are standardized to around 40% EGCG or ‘catechins’.^{xxxv}

References available upon request