

Healthy body = Healthy mind

Exams are like a mental marathon. The right food and drink can energise your body, improve your alertness and sustain you through the long exam hours. The wrong choices can make you feel sluggish, jittery, or burned out. There is no perfect solution to exam energy but the following tips should help you perform at your best on exam day.

During the buildup to the exams

During Study Leave and the build-up to the exam period, think about what you're eating. When eaten alone, carbohydrates make you feel more relaxed than alert - they can make you feel heavy and sleepy. But carbs are essential so are a good option for the weeks and days before the exam, though maybe not too much of them on the actual exam day. Think of marathon runners who have a "pasta party" the night before a run but few carbs on the day so that their body has the fuel on board but feel sprightly before and during the race.

During Study Leave

Make sure you drink enough water before and during your exam. Tea also works, though without a lot of sugar. Dehydration can make you lose your concentration, feel faint, and sap your energy. If you don't drink much water now, start building up before the exam. If you go from drinking a little beforehand then drinking lots on the day, you'll just end up running to the loo throughout an exam or be concentrating on being "bursting" rather than concentrating on the task at hand.

Eat enough to feel satisfied but not so much as to feel full. If you eat a big breakfast or lunch before an exam, you will feel drowsy and heavy as your body tries to digest too much food. But, make sure you do eat!

Many students get into the habit of studying late into the night, hoping to cram in a little more information into their already exhausted brains. Instead, on the night before the exam, stop studying in the early evening. After that, take it easy, eat your dinner, lay out your clothes for the next day, pack your bag, take a shower, set a couple of alarms and head to bed early. You've done all you can. To function at your best on exam day, you need not only the energy that comes from healthy nutrition, but also the energy that comes from adequate, restful sleep.

On the day

Your brain needs to work efficiently so **don't skip breakfast** because you're nervous. Keep your mental focus on your exam and not on hunger. If you really cannot stomach food, then try having a smoothie.

Eat protein-rich foods which can lead to greater mental alertness. Healthy food choices on exam day include eggs, nuts, yogurt, and cottage cheese. Good breakfast combinations might be whole-grain cereal with low-fat milk, eggs and toast with jam, porridge, oatmeal, or sugar-free muesli. Other dietary choices considered to be brain foods are fish, walnuts, blueberries, sunflower seeds, flaxseed, dried fruits, figs, and prunes. Many consider fruit to provide excellent brain fuel, which can help you think faster and remember more easily. You could eat melon, oranges,

strawberries, blueberries, or bananas. In terms of vegetables; raw carrots, peppers, spinach, broccoli, asparagus and even Brussels sprouts are good choices.

Stay away from foods made of white flour such as biscuits and cakes which require added time and energy to digest. Also avoid foods that are high in refined sugar such as chocolates, sweeties and desserts.

Avoid sugary drinks such as coke or Irn Bru. It's also good to avoid caffeine, as it can increase your nervousness. However, if you are used to drinking coffee regularly, then have a small cup or two as you could end up with a caffeine-withdrawal headache if you suddenly stop! Try to eat something healthy along with your coffee.

In some exams you have a 15-20 mins break. Have healthy snacks, such as protein bars, trail mix, energy bars, granola bars, almonds, walnuts, or fruit for such times, to keep your energy high. Avoid chocolates or sweet treats as the energy high will be followed by an energy crash during your exam!

Exercise

There is always the temptation to study constantly during Study Leave and during the build-up to the exams. As much as revision is important, your body also needs exercise and time to relax. Build time for exercise and relaxation into your study plan. As well as leaving you feeling refreshed and energised, exercise can improve attention and speed of processing. When you exercise, your blood chemistry changes and helps get nutrients to the brain. Just don't overdo it! Going from zero to hero will just run your body down physically.

Overall

The advice given here is pretty general. If you have a routine with regular exercise and healthy brain food already, don't change it. Go with what you know already works. If you've read this and now know you're eating the wrong stuff to keep you alert and on task, start making gradual changes **now**. Like revision and exam preparation, the sooner you start the changes the better the impact and lesser the shock to your system.