I came across an interesting study which suggested that a cluttered, chaotic environment, such as a messy kitchen, influences our snacking behavior in a less-than-helpful way. Since one of the most common New Year’s resolutions is to eat healthy and/or lose weight, this seemed like a good time to consider the concept.

A recent Cornell University experiment, published in *Environment and Behavior*, compared the snacking habits of 100 young women. Half were assigned to a clean kitchen where they completed a writing assignment without any distractions. The others were sent to a cluttered kitchen where they had to work while a researcher noisily attempted to clean up.

All participants were then presented with cookies, crackers, and baby carrots for what they thought was a taste test. Those in the clean, quiet kitchen consumed fewer calories than participants surrounded by clutter and noise.

The participants’ thoughts and focus also mattered. The women that were asked to write about a time when they felt chaotic and out of control ate more cookies than those told to write about being organized and in control. The cluttered, noisy environment had no impact on consumption of crackers or carrots.

Although a chaotic environment can create a vulnerability to making unhealthy food choices, one’s mind-set in that environment can either trigger or buffer against that vulnerability.

So...I’m thinking that for some of us a successful New Year’s resolution might begin with a clean, calm kitchen. Happy 2017!
Butter Ain’t Back

“The case for eating butter just got stronger,” declared Time magazine in June. A new study found no link between eating butter and heart disease.”

Not so fast! In the new report, researchers looked at four studies on roughly 175,000 (mostly) Europeans to assess butter’s impact on cardiovascular disease. After 10 to 16 years, those who reported eating more butter had no higher (or lower) risk of a heart attack or other cardiovascular event than those who said they ate less.

But the studies asked people what they typically ate only once—when the studies began—which could have obscured butter’s impact (since someone who later switched to another fat would still count as a butter eater). What’s more, two of the four studies masked the impact of butter on cardiovascular disease by “adjusting” for blood cholesterol levels. And it’s not clear why a single food like butter would affect risk, since people who eat butter don’t necessarily eat an overall diet that’s high in saturated fat.

A better study, which tracked 126,000 people for 26 to 32 years (with diet updates every four years), reported that those who ate more saturated fats had a higher risk of dying than those who ate more unsaturated fats.

What to do: Replace saturated fats (like butter, red meat, and cheese) with unsaturated fats (like oils, salad dressing, nuts, and fatty fish).

Go with the (Whole) Grain

Are you wondering why you should eat whole-grain rather than the refined breads, cereals, and other foods made with enriched, processed flour? How does a lower risk of dying of heart disease, stroke, and cancer sound?

Researchers looked at 45 studies that tracked 245,000 to 705,000 people for 3 to 26 years. The results: People who typically consumed three servings of whole grains—say two slices of bread and one bowl of cereal—a day had about a 20% lower risk of dying of heart disease and a 15% lower risk of dying of stroke or cancer than those who consumed no whole grains. The researchers found no higher risk of any other chronic disease in people who ate more white breads, white rice, or other refined grains.

A second meta-analysis (of 14 studies) reported that each daily serving of whole grains was linked to a 9% lower risk of dying of cardiovascular disease and a 5% lower risk of dying of cancer.

What to do: Go for whole grains. These kinds of studies can’t prove that whole grains prevent disease, but what do you have to lose?

10 Steps to Protect Yourself Against Colds and Flu

It is time to protect yourself before the flu and cold season peaks in January and February. Since the immune system weakens with age, it is even more important for older adults to take preventive measures. The common cold is the leading cause of workplace absences and infections can be more serious than a case of the sniffles. Complications can include bronchitis, strep throat, and pneumonia.

Every year, between 5% and 20% of Americans will get the flu, with about 200,000 sick enough to be hospitalized, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Keep in mind that it takes 2 weeks after getting the flu vaccine for an adult to develop antibodies against the disease. That’s why getting your flu shot is the first step in reducing your risk and boosting your immune system, according to Simin Nikbin Meydani, DVM, PhD.

1. **Get vaccinated.** “The good news is 70% of older adults do get a shot,” Meydani says. “The not-so-good news is that no flu vaccine is 100% effective; in a typical year it has a 40% efficacy rate. But don’t let that statistic or any media reports stop you from getting immunized—if you have reservations, talk to your physician.” Studies also show the vaccine will reduce your risk of flu-related hospitalization.

2. **Eat more fruits and vegetables.** The antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals that come with eating at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day can help strengthen your immune system to better fight off infections. Don’t let supermarket availability of fresh fruits and vegetables keep you from consuming plenty of produce. Research has shown that frozen fruits and vegetables, typically picked at the peak of ripeness and nutritional content, are at least as good for you as fresh. Stir frozen berries into smoothies or oatmeal and make vegetable-rich soups, casseroles, stir fry, and stews.

3. **Get a good night’s sleep.** Sleep is an important natural remedy to protect against colds and flu. University of Washington scientists have linked a brain-specific protein associated with sleep to the ability to fight off symptoms of the flu. Older adults should get seven to eight hours of sleep each night to support a healthy immune system, according to other research published in the journal *Sleep*.

4. **Consider foods rich in zinc.** Research suggests there are benefits to adding zinc to your anti-infection routine. Zinc is found in high-protein foods such as the dark meat of chicken or turkey, lamb and pork. Good plant sources include nuts and seeds, legumes, and whole grains. Zinc is also found in fortified breakfast cereals and is common in multi-vitamins. Don’t overdo it with supplements, however—too much zinc (the upper limit for adults is 40 Mil. a day) can be harmful.

5. **Drink plenty of fluids.** “Especially water, but also consider drinking green tea, which contains antioxidants that will help reduce inflammation or try turmeric tea,” Meydani says. Keep in mind that the fluid in soups, fruits, vegetables, tea, coffee and other foods also counts.

6. **Walk.** One study of people of all ages found those who walked at least 20 minutes a day, five times a week, had 43% fewer sick days than others who exercised one day or less a week. The study also found that when the people who walked this moderate amount each week did get sick, their symptoms were milder and the cold or flu lasted for a shorter period.

7. **Get plenty of vitamin E.** This antioxidant vitamin is effective in building up the immune system. A study found that vitamin E improves the human body’s response to the flu vaccine and reduces the risk of upper respiratory infections. You can get vitamin E in foods such as wheat germ, nuts, sunflower seeds, leafy greens, olives, and liquid vegetable oils.

8. **Reduce calories if overweight.** Studies have shown that when people with excess weight reduce their calorie intake for six months and lose belly fat, their immune response is strengthened. Best results were seen when cutting calories by 30%, but even a 10% reduction was shown to be beneficial. Make sure to reduce your intake in ways that do not create nutritional deficiencies.

9. **Wash often and long.** Cold and flu germs can come from contaminated surfaces or from touching people and can be countered by frequently washing your hands with soap and warm water. When washing, rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds to eliminate germs—and remember to clean under your nails. Avoid rubbing your eyes and nose or covering your mouth with your hands.

10. **Pay attention to your body.** “Most people know when they are getting rundown or taking on more stress than is good for the immune system. Watch for signs and take action,” Meydani advises. The other 9 steps in this article are a good place to start.

Nothing can protect you completely against seasonal infections, of course, but these tips should improve your odds.

Source: Adapted from Tufts Health & Nutrition Newsletter, October 2016
Keep Active to Protect Your Brain

Exercise may delay mental aging and preserve gray matter. Two new studies provide important evidence of how physical activity might reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of cognitive decline. One study reported that participants who were most active showed the least decline—the equivalent of 10 years of mental aging. In a second study, the most active older adults were found to have the largest volume of gray matter in brain regions typically affected most by Alzheimer’s.

**INTENSITY MATTERS:** For the first study, researchers looked at data on 876 people enrolled in the Northern Manhattan Study who were asked how long and how often they exercised during the previous two weeks. Most respondents—90%—reported no exercise at all or only light exercise such as walking and yoga. The remaining 10% reported moderate to high-intensity exercise, such as running or aerobics.

An average of seven years later, each participant was given tests of memory and thinking skills and a brain MRI. Five years after that, they took the memory and thinking tests again. Among people with no initial signs of memory or thinking problems, those in the low-activity group showed a greater decline in how fast they could perform simple tasks and how many words they could remember from a list. Compared to the higher-activity 10%, the difference was equal to that of 10 years of aging. That disparity remained after adjustments for other factors that could affect brain health, such as smoking, alcohol use, high blood pressure, and body mass index.

**EXPENDED CALORIES COUNT:** Further evidence linking activity to brain health comes from another population study, published in the *Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease*. To evaluate the long-term effects of physical activity on brain health, researchers analyzed data on a subgroup of almost 900 participants in the Cardiovascular Health Study, launched in 1989. The men and women, at least age 65 when the study began, had completed medical and cognitive tests, answered questionnaires about their physical activity, and underwent MRI scans of their brains. The study used questionnaires to estimate how many weekly calories participants expended in exercise, including walking, jogging, and moderate cycling, as well as activities such as gardening and dancing. After five years, compared with more sedentary subject, the most active one-quarter of participants had significantly more gray matter in parts of the brain associated with memory and high-level thinking. This difference was observed regardless of cognitive status.

For participants who were cognitively normal at the time of the initial scan, the volume of gray matter in those areas of the brain was associated with subsequent risk of developing mild or severe cognitive impairment; Greater gray matter predicted lower risk. Even among those diagnosed with dementia or mild cognitive impairment at the outset, the extent of brain atrophy was less in the high-activity group than for their more sedentary peers.

If you’re not already physically active, another finding of the study should encourage you to get up and get moving. Among the small number of participants who increased their activity levels, significant increases in gray-matter volume were observed in those same key parts of the brain.

Source: Tufts Health & Nutrition Newsletter, July 2016