

Iron and zinc to help kids think

BY JOE SNYDER

You want certain things for your kids — for them to be healthy, stand up straight, think and speak clearly, do well in school. Eating beef can help. How? It's full of the nutrients that help kids grow healthy, both mentally and physically.

Cognition — the ability to perceive, think and remember — is influenced by many factors, nutrition chief among them. Consuming the nutrients necessary to aid cognitive skills is crucial at any age, but especially during formative years when the brain and its functions are being developed. Lack of the proper nutrients can lead to problems relating to attention and responsiveness — in other words, the ability to learn.

Nutrients key to the ability to learn include iron and zinc. Unfortunately, American children are not getting enough of either one in their diets. This is amazing when you think about the abundance of everything in this country, including food. Iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency in America, even though iron is widely available in our food supply. One reason for this is poor eating habits.

It has been estimated that 700,000 American toddlers are iron deficient. Researchers have demonstrated that even mild, short-term deficiencies of nutrients can impair mental and physical performance. Some suggest that iron deficiency in the early years may affect youngsters permanently, although this issue is unresolved, since the effect of iron deficiency on cognition is also influenced by other factors such as timing and severity.

Studies have shown that iron-deficient infants and toddlers generally perform poorly on tests of mental and motor development. These kids are also characterized as being withdrawn, inattentive and lethargic.

Researchers have discovered a

connection between school children suffering from iron deficiency and poor performance on IQ and achievement tests. They have also found that treatment in the form of iron supplements helped these students reduce errors and improve their efficiency scores.

Zinc has a similar story. Zinc deficiency is associated with decreased brain function, including attention span, learning ability, short-term memory and problem-solving skills. It can also reduce growth potential, decrease immunity and delay sexual maturation in children. It has been demonstrated that school-age children receiving zinc supplements improve recognition memory, reasoning, psychomotor functions and attention.

Meat: the nutrient package

Where does one get the nutrients that kids (and adults) need? Animal products such as red meat are a major source of iron and zinc. According to the latest data, foods in the Meat Group contribute over 16 percent of the iron and more than 41 percent of the zinc available in the nation's food supply. For both children and adults, beef has been identified as the third-largest source of iron and the No. 1 source of zinc.

USDA's Food Guide Pyramid recommends that all healthy Americans two years and older eat two or three servings each day (5 to 7 ounces) of foods from the Meat Group. These foods contain heme iron, which is more readily absorbed than non-heme iron found in grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy products. Because some early weaning foods are iron-fortified but low in zinc, introducing beef as an early food to breast-fed infants older than six months can help meet infants needs for both iron and zinc.

Dr. Nancy Krebs has conducted



research

in this area. She is associate professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and director of Coordinated Nutrition Services at the Children's Hospital. Her study found a high acceptance among babies for beef as a first weaning food.

"Lean beef is a good thing to offer children, a good source of nutrients that they need," says Dr. Krebs. She adds that parents can benefit their children's diets by being "aware that meat is an appropriate part of a good balanced diet" and exposing them to good eating habits.

"It's up to parents to present children with good food and make it part of a well-balanced diet," she says, and "it helps if they see their parents eating it.

"Make sure the texture isn't too difficult for them," Dr. Krebs advises. "For 1-2 year olds, ground products are easier to chew. And young children like simple foods as opposed to complicated foods — hamburgers as opposed to casseroles, for example. The beef industry has developed lots of products that are easily incorporated into children's lunches and are convenient to make, such as ready-to-serve meats."

So let's get out there and raise the healthiest kids we can — kids that stand up straight, think clearly, and let's see to it that they get all the important nutrients they need to grow into strong, smart, healthy adults! ■