Dear Alice,

What is the best way to prepare, health wise, before a big test such as the SAT, LSAT, MCAT? What foods do you recommend to keep my "brain moving?"

Answer

Dear Reader,

The best way to prepare for a test, big or small, or any other stressful life event, is to keep yourself in overall good health. Exercising regularly helps keep the mind alert, reduces fatigue, and facilitates a better night's sleep. Maintaining a balanced diet that includes enough varied sources of vitamins, minerals, fiber, protein, and carbohydrates will help you out a great deal on the day of your test. If your body has a sufficient store of essential nutrients, like iron and calcium, it will be better prepared to help you cope with the physical response to stress that you might experience if you're at all anxious. Also, in the event that you don't get enough sleep or proper nutrition right before the test, you'll have already stocked up on the things your body needs to keep you going.

Eating a protein-rich diet before the test may really help. Your body breaks down protein into its building blocks, amino acids, one of which is tyrosine. The brain uses tyrosine to manufacture dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters believed to help increase alertness, mental acuity, motivation, and response time to challenges. So, on the day of the test, include more dietary sources of protein in your breakfast, such as eggs, legumes (beans and peas), grains, non- or low-fat dairy products [i.e., milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, hard cheese (cheddar, American, Swiss, etc.)], seeds, and nuts (try spreading some peanut butter on a bagel). Speaking of bagels, try to avoid eating only carbohydrates for breakfast because they help stimulate the brain to use the amino acid tryptophan to produce serotonin, another neurotransmitter. Unlike dopamine and norepinephrine, serotonin may increase feelings of tiredness and relaxation.

Don't forget to stay hydrated. Without proper fluid balance, you may begin to feel the way your plants look when you forget to water them! It's a good idea to drink plenty of water during the days before the test. You may not want to risk needing to run to the bathroom during your tests. However, don't allow yourself to become dehydrated either. Consider carrying a water bottle with you to the exam room for sipping.

Of course, all the water and healthy food in the world won't help you much if you haven't
studied. Avoid running out to buy one of those thousand page test prep books days before the exam! Instead, try to begin preparing well in advance of the test date. Try to come up with a reasonable test preparation schedule. If you always have Sunday mornings free, then try setting that time aside for study and review. If designing and sticking to a schedule isn't your style, you might want to consider taking a class offered at your school or by a test prep company. No breakfast of champions can overcome the anxieties raised from being unprepared.

If you can, try a trial run of the exam. Similar to training for a running marathon, you may train your body for an exam marathon with increasingly longer practice exams. You may usually find out how the test is conducted, when it starts and ends, as well as at what time and for how long the breaks are. You may use this information to simulate the test day. Time yourself with an alarm clock, or have someone keep time for you. Also check with your school's advising office to see if they offer mock tests.

Before the test, consider using guided imagery as a means of preparation. See yourself at the testing center: receiving your test, starting, how you'll be approaching the test. Will you answer the questions in order, or will you do what you're most comfortable with first? Imagine yourself doing that. Visualize what you'll do if you start feeling overwhelmed by the test. Closing your eyes, breathing deeply, and calming self-talk are strategies some people use. These relaxation techniques may be helpful if you start to get overwhelmed during the test, but remember to watch your time if the test is time-limited.

A few other tips to try:

- Orient yourself. Find out exactly where the test is given (location and room), and how long it would take you to get there; do a trial run if you're unfamiliar with the roads and area with a good time buffer.
- Try to get a good night's sleep the nights before.
- Avoid foods you know will make you feel sluggish, bloated, or otherwise not like a million bucks, the day before and the morning of the test.
- If you're a coffee drinker, keep your coffee intake to a minimum. Caffeine shakes may distract you and your test taking neighbor.
- If the test goes all day, eat lunch (but not so much that you'll feel like napping rather than testing in the afternoon).
- Have in mind a post-exam celebratory activity for you to look forward to!

Good luck!

Alice!

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- Stress & Anxiety

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