

HEALTHY DIET, HEALTHY MIND



The old saying “you are what you eat” may have some truth to it. Most of us have likely experienced, in one way or another, how food can make us feel bad after eating it. Maybe you’ve felt uncomfortable and tired after a big Thanksgiving meal or energized to start your morning after a healthy fruit smoothie. Food affects both our physical and mental health.

Depression is very common in our society for a variety of reasons. It is sometimes a secondary condition associated with people who have chronic health conditions or disabilities and face unique problems and challenges which may place them at increased risk. Depression is a serious illness and it is very important to see a health care professional for treatment if you are experiencing signs of depression. Good nutrition is an important component of an improved mood and an increased sense of wellbeing but it is not a substitute for medical care.

HOW NUTRIENTS HELP YOUR BRAIN

What we eat can determine how we feel, but how we feel can also determine what we eat. Food and the chemicals in our brains interact to keep us going throughout the day. It is important to eat a variety of healthy foods, as they have different effects on our brains. For example, carbohydrates increase serotonin, a brain chemical that has a calming effect. Perhaps that’s why people often crave carbohydrate-rich foods when they are under stress. Protein-rich foods increase tyrosine, dopamine, and norepinephrine, which help to increase alertness. In addition, certain healthy fats (omega-3 fatty acids) become part of the membranes of brain cells and control many brain processes. Poor nutrition or lack of a variety of healthy foods can contribute to depression by limiting the availability of these specific nutrients.

Nutrition, on Back



COUNSELOR CORNER

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Q: Can my food choices really affect my mental health?

A: With the holiday season and New Year’s behind us, many people start thinking about adopting a new (or possibly improved) health routine. Many of us make a New Year’s resolution to eat better and improve our nutrition. Everyone seems to be looking for the best information on what they should and shouldn’t eat, and it can become overwhelming to even know where to start.

While having a healthy diet and good nutrition offer great benefits for our physical health, more and more research is being done into how our food choices have a big impact on our overall mental health.

Continued on Back

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Eating nutritious foods – and a wide variety of foods – is so vital to our overall physical and mental health. The foods we eat provide the “fuel” for all of our bodily functions, when we fill our bodies with garbage, we don’t function at our best. Our bodies rely on many vitamins and minerals to help carry out different functions. If we are missing key nutrients, our bodies either “borrow” them from other sources, or we aren’t able to function at 100 percent.

You may wonder if there are certain foods that you can eat to help improve your overall mental health. Let’s take a look at how our brains function in relation to nutrition.

Our brains consume about 420 calories per day, which is about 20 percent of our daily caloric intake. So we need to eat enough food, and the most nutritious food, so that we are properly “feeding” our brain.

One area of nutrition that often gets a bad rap is fat. There has been a long association with fat being bad, and to limit

the amount of fat in our diets. Our brain is made up of 60 percent fat, so we need to include a good amount of fat in our diet to help with overall brain health. So you want to include foods in your diet that are a good source of fat such as salmon, olive oil, avocado oil, and coconut oil. Look for foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Limit your intake of foods that are high in saturated fats, salts, and sugars.

A good rule of thumb is to look for foods that are as minimally processed as possible and have a short ingredient list (think of the ingredients in an apple versus a bag of Cheetos). Current research suggests our food choices can have an impact on improving symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, and other mental health conditions. Before changing your diet or implementing new foods, be sure to visit with your doctor or primary health care provider. Think of your food choices as another tool in your toolkit to help you be at your best mentally!

Nutrition, from Front

WHAT DEFICIENCIES CAN DO

While nutrient deficiencies are usually rare, it’s important to note the effect that certain deficiencies can have on mental health.

Thiamine (vitamin B1), which is found in legumes, some seeds, and fortified grains, is necessary for maintaining your energy supplies and coordinating the activity of nerves and muscles. Thiamine deficiency can therefore lead to weakness, irritability, and depression. Folate (vitamin B9), which is found in leafy greens, legumes, and fortified grains, is essential for supporting red blood cell production, helping to prevent homocysteine build-up in your blood, and allowing nerves to function properly. Folate deficiency can result in depression, apathy, fatigue, poor sleep, and poor concentration.

Please note that no research studies support taking large amounts of vitamin supplements to prevent or treat depression. It is very important to talk with your doctor before taking any vitamin or supplement. Vitamins and minerals from food are much more readily and efficiently absorbed in the body than those obtained from supplements. By eating a wide variety of foods – including lean proteins, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, healthy fats, and low-fat dairy products – you are bound to obtain the nutrients needed to support a healthy body and mind.

HERE ARE FIVE FOODS THAT KEEP THE MIND WORKING AT ITS BEST:

- Fatty fish
- Whole grains
- Lean protein
- Leafy greens
- Yogurt with active cultures

Source: Carolyn Coker Ross, MD, MPH

HOW TIMING CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

While what we eat can have a significant impact on how we feel, when we eat is equally important. Often the low energy levels that people feel throughout the day are a result of poor meal timing. For example, eating patterns that involve skipping meals may contribute to mood swings by causing fluctuations in blood sugar levels. Food restriction can lead to binge eating, bigger emotional responses, poor concentration, increased stress, and an overall lower sense of well-being. Depression has been shown to develop in people with disordered eating who frequently restrict food. The optimal way to fuel your body is to space meals and snacks 3 to 4 hours apart and choose a healthy protein and carbohydrate source at each meal.



ChooseMyPlate.gov offers a look inside the different components that make up a healthy eating plan. Visit the site to ensure you are getting a variety of healthy foods for a healthy body and mind.

Next time you eat, pay attention to how you feel afterwards. Perhaps you’ll begin to notice you’re in a better mood and have more energy after eating a healthy meal. Remember to eat a variety of foods and space your meals and snacks throughout the day.

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