

Depression and Diet

Good nutrition is important for our mental and physical health. This Food Fact Sheet will look at how following a healthy diet can protect your mental health.

Eat regular meals

You wouldn't expect your car to run without fuel, so in the same way you need to feed your brain regularly with the right mix of nutrients for it to work properly. Unlike other organs, your brain cannot use fat or protein as fuel – it can only use glucose. Therefore, a steady supply of carbohydrates (that are broken down in the body to produce blood glucose) throughout the day is essential. Aim to eat little and often.

Get the right balance of fats

Our brains are made of around 40% fat, and our cells need fats to maintain their structures, therefore an adequate supply of unsaturated fat is needed to maintain health. Try to use olive oil or rapeseed oil to cook with. Add nuts and seeds, and use olive or nut oil dressings on salads.

As well as increasing unsaturated fats, try to decrease trans fats as these seem to be harmful to brain structure and function (as well as heart health). Trans fats are found in processed and packaged foods such as burgers, sausages, processed meats, ready meals, pre-packed cakes and biscuits. Instead try to use fresh foods and ingredients whenever you can.

Choose more wholegrains, fruit and vegetable foods

Wholegrain cereals, peas, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables are rich in a range of vitamins and minerals that your body needs in order to function well. They are digested slowly, helping to control the rate of glucose supply to your brain and body. These foods are also rich in B vitamins, (including folate) and zinc, which evidence suggests are important in managing depression. Try to eat at least five different fruits and vegetables daily to get all the vitamins and minerals you need.

Include some protein at every meal

Tryptophan is one of the building blocks of protein, and has been shown to play a role in depression. Studies have shown that adding pure tryptophan to the diet of people with depression can improve their mood. You can't buy tryptophan supplements but you can make sure that your diet contains it by ensuring you eat enough protein. Protein also contains essential nutrients, and eating it little and often helps to keep us feeling full, which in turn, can prevent overeating. Fresh meat, fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, low fat cheese, nuts, seeds, lentils and beans are the best sources of protein. Fill around one-third of your plate with a protein food.

Include oily fish in your diet

Some researchers think that omega 3 oils - found in oily fish - may help to reduce depression rates, and these are important in maintaining a varied healthy diet. Try to include two to four portions of oily fish per week (just two if you are pregnant or breastfeeding or likely to become pregnant in the future). Oily fish are salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, pilchards and trout.

If you don't like fish you may decide to take an omega 3 supplement. If so, choose a fish body oil (these do not contain vitamin A) rather than fish liver oils. Too much vitamin A is stored in the liver and can build up to toxic levels and it can interfere with calcium metabolism. Also make sure it has a high proportion of the active ingredients - eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). Take up to a total of 1g/day of these essential fatty acids.

Typical day

- Make sure you start the day with breakfast, for example a wholegrain cereal such as porridge with milk and fruit, multigrain toast with a poached egg, or fruit and yoghurt and fresh fruit juice or smoothie to drink.
- Include some starchy food (such as boiled potatoes, rice, pasta, and granary or multigrain breads) at lunch and dinner. If you are short of time, then go for a sandwich or jacket potato (filled with fish or low fat cheese and salad) or even a bowl of cereal and some fruit.
- Between meals include snacks such as fruit, vegetables, nuts, yoghurts, and oatcakes, crackers with low fat cheese, meat or fish.

If you are vegetarian, sources of high quality omega 3 are limited. Plant sources do not convert through to DHA and EPA very well. You could buy an algae-based supplement, but these are expensive. Alternatively try omega 3 fortified foods such as eggs and milk.

Drink enough fluid

Evidence shows that even slight dehydration may affect your mood. Aim for 6-8 glasses (about 1.5 - 2 litres) fluid per day. Caffeine may affect your mood and may lead to withdrawal headaches and to low or irritable mood when the effects wear off. Drinks such as coffee, cola, energy drinks, tea and chocolate all contain caffeine. Avoid all energy drinks, and try to limit intake to three cups of coffee, or five cups of tea a day.

Alcohol also has a dehydrating effect. Drinking too much alcohol can also lead to B vitamin deficiencies, and can make you more depressed or anxious. Try to limit intake to no more than two to three drinks on no more than five days per week.

Should I take nutritional supplements?

If you have not been eating well recently, or rely on ready meals and packaged foods regularly, you may be lacking certain vitamins and minerals. If you smoke or drink too much alcohol you may also need extra nutrients. If so, you may want to take a one-a-day complete multivitamin and mineral supplement. These contain a full range of all the essential nutrients. Choose one that contains 100% of recommended daily intakes. Very high dose supplements (more than 100%) are not more effective than these and just cost extra money. They may even cause an increased risk of ill health. Vitamin A and E supplements in particular are not recommended for smokers.

Recent research has also shown that folate (one of the B vitamins) supplements may increase the effectiveness of antidepressant medication. If you are thinking about taking any additional nutrient supplements ask your doctor for advice. You should still aim to eat a healthy balanced diet as supplements can't give you all of the goodness you can get from food.

I am gaining/losing too much weight. What should I do?

First ask your doctor to review any medicines that you are taking. Some are better than others at boosting appetite and a change may help you. If you are losing a lot of weight and are worried, ask to see a dietitian. If you are putting on weight it may make you feel more depressed. If you want to lose weight, try to exercise more. Also, limit foods that are high in calories, such as pies, chips, puddings, cakes, crisps, chocolate, sugary drinks and alcohol.

Summary

Eat regularly throughout the day, including starch, protein and vegetables or salad at each meal to make sure your brain has a steady supply of energy.

Choose wholegrains, pulses, fresh foods, and fruit and vegetables; minimise processed/packaged foods to make sure you get enough micronutrients to help your brain to function properly. Ensure that you have adequate unsaturated fat intake to maintain the cell structure of your brain and limit saturated fat intake.

Include oily fish (omega 3 fatty acids) in your diet. Drink plenty of fluid (6 - 8 glasses non-caffeinated drinks) per day as even slight dehydration can affect your mood.

Further Information

Food Fact Sheets on topics in this sheet including *Fats* and *Alcohol* can be downloaded at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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