

Food and Mood

What we eat has the potential to not only impact our physical health but can also change our mood and/or energy levels. This may be due to what you consume or the feelings that you associate with certain foods (both positive and negative).

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates provide us with glucose that our brain and body require for energy. Not eating enough foods with carbohydrate can leave us feeling tired and lacking in energy. To prevent this occurring, eat regular meals containing carbohydrates from sources such as fruits, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes.

These foods are also good sources of fibre, which helps the digestive system function well. Stress and anxiety can both cause digestion to *slow down* (causing bloating and constipation) or *speed up* (causing diarrhoea), so eating foods for a healthy gut may be beneficial to avoid worsening these symptoms.



Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3 fatty acids are important for healthy brain function. Oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines and herring are a great source of omega-3 fatty acids, and including one portion of oily fish each week will help you get these beneficial fats. Other sources of omega-3 include flax seeds, chia seeds, walnuts and pumpkin seeds.

There is some evidence that omega-3 fatty acids can have a beneficial effect on depression¹. More research is needed, but incorporating foods containing omega-3's will have a positive effect on general health, as well as potentially improving mood!

Vitamins and Minerals

Deficiencies in micronutrients such as iron, magnesium, potassium, B-vitamins and vitamin D can result in feeling tired and/or weak.

Some micronutrient deficiencies have also been associated with an increased risk of depression, including:

- Folate and Vitamin B12²
- Vitamin D³
- Zinc, Magnesium and Selenium⁴

To prevent nutrient deficiencies, eat a healthy balanced diet. See our factsheet '**What is a healthy diet**' for more information.

A vitamin D supplement of 10µg (micrograms) daily between October and March is also recommended for all children from the age of 1 year and all adults. If you are worried that you might have a nutrient deficiency, you should speak to your GP.

Dietary Patterns

Healthier dietary patterns, with higher intakes of fruits, vegetables, fish, nuts, legumes and includes healthy fats such as olive or rapeseed oil, and restricted intakes of processed foods, have been associated with a reduced risk of depression⁵. In contrast, a Western-style diet, typically higher in processed, high fat and high sugar foods, has been associated with a higher risk of developing depression⁵.

The Mediterranean diet is a dietary pattern high in fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, legumes, wholegrains, fish, seafood and olive oil. It has moderate amounts of poultry, eggs and dairy and limits the consumption of red meat and processed foods and drinks. The Mediterranean diet has been widely studied due to its benefits for health, including being linked with a lower risk of depression⁶.

Following a dietary pattern similar to those associated with a reduced risk of depression will have a positive effect on overall health, while having the potential to also benefit mental health.

Keeping Hydrated

The majority of the brain is water, so it's no surprise that staying hydrated is important! Drinking water can help to prevent headaches, reduce fatigue and improve concentration.

In contrast, some drinks may affect mood negatively. Caffeine is a stimulant, found in drinks such as tea, coffee, energy drinks and some soft drinks. Consuming caffeine will often improve feelings of alertness⁷, however high intakes can cause side-effects such as problems sleeping, headaches and increased heart rate, as well as potentially exacerbating feelings of anxiety⁸. If you feel you are drinking too much caffeine, swapping to decaffeinated options in the afternoon may be helpful.

Enjoying Food

The feelings we associate with food can also affect mood when eating. For example, eating a food you like is going to make you feel happier than eating one you dislike! Although it can be beneficial to limit the consumption of certain foods in the diet, completely restricting these foods may in turn have a negative impact such as feelings of guilt if you “cave in” and eat them.

All foods that you enjoy can have a place in your diet, just some more in moderation than others.



The settings in which we eat can also influence our feelings, for example eating with friends or family tends to be more enjoyable than eating alone. Taking your time and enjoying your meal can also help with digestion.

We all tend to occasionally use food as a reward or for comfort if we are feeling stressed or upset. This can become a problem if it is the only mechanism you have to cope with different moods and can, in turn, make you feel worse if you eat past feeling full. Finding other ways to de-stress or improve your mood can be beneficial, such as exercising, dancing, reading or doing something creative.

References:

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