

Nutrition and Mental Health



Most people understand that what they eat affects their physical health. You probably know that eating a mix of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and healthy proteins is better for your body than a diet high in salt, sugar, and processed food. You may not be as aware that the same mix of healthy foods is also important for good mental health.

THE NUTRITIONAL NEEDS OF A HEALTHY BRAIN

It makes sense that good nutrition is important for mental health, given the metabolic processes involved in a well-functioning brain and nervous system. While the brain makes up just two percent of an average person's weight, it uses 20 percent of the body's blood flow. In this sense, the brain is the most demanding organ in the body. It needs oxygen, of course, and glucose for energy, but that massive circulation of blood also supplies a broad array of needed vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. Your body doesn't

make the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients these brain compounds and molecules need. They come into your body through the food you eat.

YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM AND YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

One surprising finding of physiological research on the workings of the human body is the close relationship between the digestive and nervous systems. The digestive system is dense with nerve cells. These connect directly to the brain through the *vagus nerve*, which plays a role in regulating your emotions. (The

term "gut feeling" turns out to have a basis in human anatomy.)

The digestive system is also dense with *bacteria microbes*. These microbes—the gut's microbiome—aid in digestion, but the types of bacteria that are present and their diversity have also been found to be related to moods and mental health. More needs to be learned through research, but it seems likely that cultivating a healthy and diverse array of bacteria in the digestive system through the foods you eat could have a positive impact on your mental health.

NUTRITION AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

The relationship between nutrition and mental health problems works in two directions. Studies have found significant positive effects from improved diet and the use of nutrient supplements (more specifically, "broad-spectrum micronutrient

supplements") in people with such mental health conditions as depression, ADHD, and psychosis. Based on these findings, and others related to the benefits of other lifestyle changes, many psychologists now work with patients to encourage healthy eating, exercise, sleep, and social connections as elements in a

mental health treatment plan.

It's also true that certain mental health conditions can make it more difficult to maintain a healthy diet. This can make strategies for attending to healthy eating an important part of a person's treatment plan.



HOW TO EAT FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

- **Eat a healthy mix of foods prepared from fresh or frozen ingredients.** Include several servings a day of fruits and vegetables; plus whole grains; and healthy proteins, such as fish, poultry, eggs, yogurt, soy products, lentils, nuts, and seeds. Eating a variety of unprocessed or minimally processed foods helps to ensure that you're getting the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients your body and brain need. Certain foods, including berries; leafy green vegetables; and oily fish, like salmon and sardines, are especially rich in needed nutrients.
- **Eat foods that support healthy digestion** and nourish the diversity of microbes in your gut. These include fruits; vegetables; whole grains; and live-culture foods, such as yogurt, kimchi, and tempeh.
- **Pay attention to your consumption of caffeine and alcohol**, both of which have powerful mood-altering effects.
- **Eat regularly, including foods that release energy slowly**, to keep your blood sugar level within a healthy range. This can help you avoid the tired, irritable feelings that can accompany low blood sugar levels. (Foods made with refined sugar; corn syrup; and refined grains, such as white flour, produced a quick surge in blood sugar levels, typically followed by a steep drop. Whole grains, proteins, and the natural sugars in fruits and vegetables produce a slower and longer-lasting lift in blood sugar levels.)
- **Avoid ultra-processed foods**, the packaged foods with long lists of manufactured ingredients and chemical additives. These foods are typically low in nutritional value, and the chemicals they contain can negatively affect your mental health.
- **Consider supplementing your diet** with the kinds of broad-spectrum micronutrient supplements that have been used in controlled studies of nutrition and mental health.