

How Food affects Mood

A Self-help Guide



There is a growing body of scientific evidence that shows a link between what you eat and drink and the way you feel

Fatty and sugary foods

Fluctuations in mood are linked to high and low levels of blood sugar. Maintaining even blood sugar levels is crucial to avoid mood swings. **What goes up must come down!**

Avoid high sugar foods as much as possible or eat them with a meal, not on their own, to lessen the impact on blood sugar levels. Have fruit, nuts or foods from the bread, cereals and potatoes group as snacks.

Caffeine

Caffeine can also cause a roller coaster effect on blood sugar, resulting in mood swings.

Try cutting out tea/coffee/cola or gradually switching to de-caffeinated versions.

Fatty foods

Our brains are 60% fat (dry weight). We need fats for health but some are better than others eg the essential fats called Omega 3 and Omega 6 fats. Saturated fat eg butter, fat on meat, cream etc and trans fats found in many ready meals, cakes, biscuits, pies etc are thought to be detrimental to mental as well as physical health.

Good sources of Omega 6 fats are seeds and oils eg olive, rapeseed, sunflower, corn, sesame or nut oils. Oily fish are our best food source of Omega 3 fats.

Food can be divided into food 'stressors' and food 'supporters'

Food 'stressors' include:

- Sugar
- Caffeine in tea, coffee, fizzy drinks
- Alcohol
- Chocolate
- Saturated fats/trans fats

Cutting down on any of the above has had a beneficial effect on mood, the top two being the most helpful.

Food 'supporters' include:

- Drinking more water – at least 6 glasses per day.
- Eating more vegetables.
- Eating oil rich fish (1-2 portions per week).
- Eating more nuts and seeds eg linseed or sunflower seeds.
- Eating more wholegrain foods.

Changes to eating habits that were helpful:

- Eating breakfast eg cereal and milk and fruit.
- Eating regularly, including starchy carbohydrate foods at every meal.
- Carrying appropriate snacks eg fruit, nuts, seeds, dried fruit.
- Planning meals in advance.

Looking at your diet is one positive way of approaching and improving your mood and well being. Another is to take 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most days of the week.



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Can food really affect my mood?

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that shows a link between what you eat and drink and the way you feel. Individuals who have made changes to their diets report the importance of certain foods for maintaining or improving their mood and well being.

How does food affect mood?

Chemicals made by the brain influence the way we think, feel and behave eg serotonin, the 'feel good' chemical. The brain needs a good supply of nutrients from food to be able to make these chemicals.

Low levels of vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids have been shown to affect mood.

How do I find out if food is affecting how I feel?

The easiest way is to look at what you are already eating and drinking. The most reliable way of doing this is to keep a food and drink diary every day for a week. Note down each time you eat or drink what you have had in a notebook and also how you are feeling at the time.

Water

The brain needs water as well as nutrients to work properly. Don't forget to check you drink enough!
Try to have at least 6-8 glasses of water per day.

What foods should I be eating to feel well?

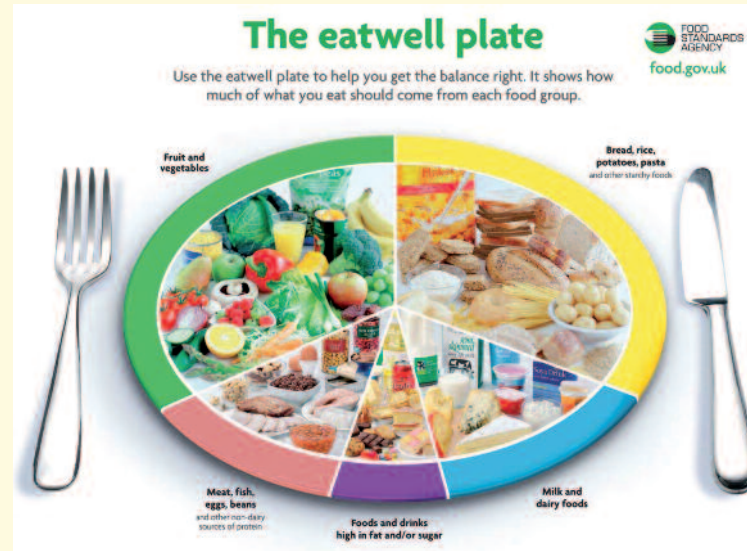
A healthy diet means having a wide variety of foods spread over a number of days, not all crammed into one day.

It is often eating too much of some foods and not enough of others that may contribute to symptoms such as anxiety or depression.

Making healthy changes to your diet means that your body gets the essential nutrients it requires for good mood and well being every day.

The eatwell plate

Use this as a guide to help you check that your diet is well balanced with a good supply of nutrients. This is when a food and drink diary will be very useful. You can compare what you are eating with the Eat Well Plate and see any changes you could make to improve the balance.



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Fruit and vegetables

Choose as wide a variety as possible, fresh, frozen, dried or tinned.

Fruit and vegetables are particularly helpful. They contain vitamins that help the body to make the brain chemicals that are important for balancing mood (eg Vitamins C, B and folate). They also contain vitamins that act as anti-oxidants, protecting the cells of the body from being damaged (eg Vitamins A and E as well as vitamin C).

Aim for five portions per day.

Bread, cereals and potatoes

This group of foods (starchy carbohydrates) contains B vitamins. Low levels of B vitamins can result in depression, anxiety, irritability, memory loss and insomnia. B vitamins are nature's antidote to anxiety and stress.

Eat some foods from this group at every meal and snack. Choose wholegrain varieties whenever possible.

Meat, fish and alternatives

These foods provide us with a good source of the amino acid tryptophan. This is converted by the body into the brain chemical serotonin (which helps keep you calm) and melatonin (which helps you to sleep). Eat these foods at 2-3 meals a day along with starchy carbohydrates. This will give you the maximum tryptophan from your food.

Oily fish

Eating fresh, tinned or frozen oily fish (eg salmon, mackerel, sardines, herring or pilchards and fresh or frozen tuna) twice a week provides Omega 3, an essential fatty acid needed for good brain function. Note: When Tuna is tinned the Omega 3 is destroyed in the process. Tinned tuna does not count as an oily fish.

Milk and dairy

These foods are a good source of calcium which helps the brain use tryptophan to make melatonin. So these are the top sleep-inducing foods! Try a low fat milky drink or yoghurt before bed to aid sleep. **Aim to have 2-3 servings from this group per day.**