



Diet and Depression



Good nutrition is important to keep us in good physical shape. It is also just as important for our mental health. Experts now think that some nutrients may be especially important in conditions such as depression. What are those nutrients? How can we follow a healthy diet that will best protect our mental health?

Eat regular meals

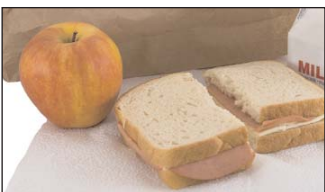
You wouldn't expect your car to run without fuel. In the same way you need to feed your brain with the right mix of nutrients for it to work properly.

- ◆ Make sure you start the day with a breakfast, for example a wholegrain cereal with milk and fruit.
- ◆ Eat regular cooked or snack (such as a sandwich or snack on toast) meals throughout the day to keep the fuel supply going.
- ◆ If you feel hungry or lacking energy between meals include extra snacks such as fruit and/or a few nuts.

Choose more wholegrain, fruit and vegetable foods



Wholegrain cereals, peas, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables are rich in a range of vitamins and minerals and provide very good nourishment for your brain. They are also digested slowly and help to control the rate of glucose supply to the brain. These foods are also rich in folate and zinc, two nutrients that seem to be very important in depression. Try to eat at least 5 portions of different fruit and vegetables daily to get all the vitamins and minerals you need.



Include some protein at every meal

One of the building blocks of protein, called tryptophan, is also especially important 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 your diet contains it. Meat, fish, eggs milk,

cheese, nuts (with the exception of peanuts which contain very little tryptophan), seeds, lentils and beans are the main protein foods.

- ◆ Make sure you include some protein at every meal
- ◆ Include some carbohydrate-rich foods to help boost the effect of protein

Include oily fish in your diet

Oily fish seems to help to protect against a lot of diseases, including heart disease. Some think it can help to reduce the symptoms of depression although medical evidence doesn't yet prove this.



- ◆ Try to include 2-4 portions of oily fish per week (NB just 2 if you are pregnant or breastfeeding or likely to become pregnant in the future).
- ◆ If you don't like fish you may want to take an omega 3 supplement. If so, choose one from fish body oil rather than fish liver oils as these are vitamin A free. 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.
- ◆ If you are vegetarian you may want to try flax seed, rapeseed, soya or walnut oil (you can add these to salads or savoury dishes after cooking) or buy omega-3 fortified foods such as eggs and milk.



Drink enough fluid

Even slight dehydration may affect your mood.

- ◆ Aim for 6-8 glasses (about 1.5- 2 litres) fluid per day.
- ◆ Caffeine may have a slightly dehydrating effect so try to drink other fluids as well, such as water, herbal teas and juices.



♦ Caffeine may also affect your mood and can lead to withdrawal headaches and low or irritable mood between 'fixes' Coffee, coca cola, tea and chocolate all contain caffeine. It is advisable to limit intake to no more than 3-4 cups coffee or equivalent a day.

♦ Alcohol also has a dehydrating effect and can make you more depressed. Try to limit intake to no more than 2-3 drinks on no more than 5 days per week (see the BDA alcohol fact sheet).

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

First ask your doctor to review any medicines 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. Try to get more exercise. Also limit pies, fries, puddings, cakes, between meal high fat snacks such as crisps and chocolate, sugary drinks and alcohol.

Key Messages

♦ Eat regularly throughout the day



♦ Choose wholegrain cereals, pulses, fruit and vegetables



♦ Include protein at each meal to supply the brain with tryptophan



♦ Include oily fish (omega 3 fatty acids) in your diet

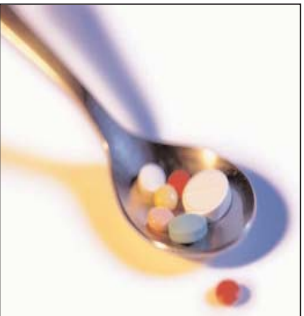


♦ Maintain an adequate fluid intake of 6 - 8 glasses per day



Should I take nutritional supplements?

If you have not been eating well recently you may be lacking certain vitamins and minerals. If you smoke or often 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 50-100% of recommended daily intakes. Very high dose supplements are not more effective than these and just cost extra money. They may even cause an increased risk of ill health. Vitamin A in particular is not recommended for smokers. Many chemists stock their own brands of multivitamin and mineral supplements.



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 for advice from a dietitian, doctor or GP. You should still aim to eat a healthy balanced diet as the supplements can't give you all the goodness you can get from food.

