

WHY EATING WELL HELPS MAKE EVERYTHING ELSE SEEM A BIT EASIER ...

BEING CLEAR ABOUT WHAT ARE 'GOOD MOOD FOODS' AND INCLUDING THEM IN YOUR DIET CAN HELP IMPROVE YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE SAYS KAREN COGLAN

NUTRITION

WE all know the importance of a healthy balanced diet when it comes to our waist lines and our physical health. But that's not where it ends.

The often forgotten, yet perhaps most important aspect of our health, is our mental health.

A healthy mind needs a healthy brain. To have a healthy brain, we must nourish it, just like every other organ in the body. A malnourished brain may lead to depression and mood swings that can interfere with normal everyday activities.

Food choices affect how we feel. The food we eat helps the brain make mood-changing chemicals, called neurotransmitters; when they are not working properly, mental illnesses such as depression can occur, affecting the way we think, feel, and behave.

Depression is the leading cause of mental disability, affecting 121 million people around the world, and has been associated with poor nutrition and deficiencies in certain nutrients that can be easily obtained from a healthy diet.

The relationship between nutrition and depression is a complicated one, but if we can begin to understand these nutrition deficiencies then it may help promote positive health outcomes and improve overall quality of life.

INCREASE YOUR OMEGA-3 FATS

Omega-3 is an essential fatty acid that cannot be produced by the body, so it must come from the food we eat. Low concentrations of omega-3 disrupt how the mood-changing neurotransmitters work in the brain and has been linked to depression. Omega-3 literally oils the brain and helps mood-elevating neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, move freely between brain cells so they can do their job.

The richest sources of omega-3 are from oily fish, such as salmon, pasture-reared eggs, walnuts, and ground flaxseeds.

Omega-6 is another essential fatty acid that must be obtained from our diet. It is recommended that we get more omega-6 than omega-3 in our diet, the best ratio being around 2:1. However, the Western diet is massively off balance and the ratio is more in the range of 20:1. This excess of omega-6 may be more of a culprit in depression than low omega-3 intake.

To shift this ratio to a more favourable one, try eating a diet that minimizes the use of corn, safflower, sunflower, and vegetable oils, while increasing intake of omega-3 rich foods, such as wild salmon and flaxseeds.

Don't eat fish? Then supplement your diet with omega-3 fish oil. Look out for liquid over

capsules because they are higher in purity and don't cause nasty "fish burps".

INCREASE INTAKE OF B VITAMINS

Maintaining healthy levels of the B vitamins and folic acid are essential for normal brain function and a healthy nervous system and have long been suspected to have an important role in warding off depression. Excellent sources of folic acid (B9) are leafy green vegetables, beans and citrus fruits. Black bean and citrus salad on a bed of colourful spinach perhaps?

The other B vitamins are found in whole unprocessed foods. Processed carbs such as sugar, white flour and breads have lower B vitamins than unprocessed foods. Great sources of B vitamins are meat, pulses, beans, whole-grains, potatoes, bananas, chilli peppers and yeast. Think dinner!

Thiamine (B1) is found in whole-grains, oatmeal, flax and sunflower seeds, brown rice, potatoes and eggs. Riboflavin (B2) is found in almonds, lean steak, milk, yogurt, and green leafy vegetables. Niacin (B3) is found in meat, tuna, peanuts, avocados and whole-grains. Vitamin B6 is found in whole-grains, fish, green vegetables, beans, and bananas. And vitamin B12 is found in fish, meat, poultry, eggs and cheese.

Other nutrients that are commonly low in those who suffer from depression are magnesium, zinc, and chromium. All of these vitamins and nutrients are responsible for the manufacture of the healthy mood-changing neurotransmitters in the brain.

A diet rich in whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, lean meats, fish, nuts and legumes will help prevent any of these nutrient deficiencies and potentially lower the risk of depression.

BALANCE BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS

Poor old sugar has been getting a lot of bad press recently, and rightly so. However, rather than scripting yet another article demonizing sugar and declaring it as the root of all evil, I'll instead write about how we can control sugar in our diet to create a positive impact on our mood, health, and overall well-being.

The food we eat impacts blood sugar levels. Sudden spikes and dips in blood sugar can lead to aggressive behaviour, anxiety, fatigue and depression. A high intake of refined sugar and processed carbs, such as white bread, cakes, and digestive biscuits dunked in our tea, are also linked with depression because they have very little to offer in terms of nutrition.

Eating carbs can provide a temporary lifted mood and people often self-medicate by eating an excessive amount of them, such as crisps and cakes, to increase serotonin levels. But what goes up, must come down, and inevitably a drop in

blood sugar will follow and you'll end up feeling worse than before. Not only is this a short-term solution, but it is also a cause of weight gain. Think PMS!

A better approach would be to control blood sugar by reducing refined carbs and eat something every three to four hours to keep mood swings under control.

High protein snacks are great options to help balance blood sugars. Try a pick-me-up snack such as low-fat Greek yogurt with berries, or a small handful of nuts and an apple.

EAT CHOCOLATE, SOMETIMES

Chocolate cravings are a real thing! Chocolate is often one of the first things we crave when moods are low. Great tasting foods, such as chocolate, stimulate endorphin release in the brain, which naturally elevates mood.

This is especially true for the fairer sex and it has been shown that there is a link between fluctuating hormones and chocolate cravings before and during menstruation. So, if you are PMSing, reach for some dark chocolate, stimulate your brain and reduce stress hormones!

WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE

For any readers thinking of following in the recent footsteps of Amy and BOD, it is worth mentioning the association between perinatal depression and nutrition.

Perinatal depression is a serious mental health problem, affecting up to 1 in 5 women, and it carries risks for the delivery, such as preeclampsia and birth difficulties, and the development of the new-born.

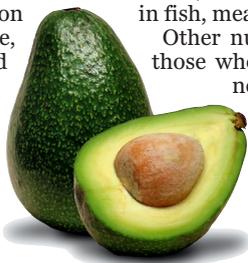
Pregnant women are at a higher risk of nutrient deficiencies simply because of the higher nutritional requirements for the growth and development of a new baby.

In particular for omega-3, which is essential to the baby's brain growth right from conception. As a result, the mother is often left depleted of omega-3 reserves by the time the baby is born.

The high demands of the foetus, along with poor dietary intake, leads to poor recovery of omega-3 levels, often taking up to six months after giving birth to return to normal.

Good nutrition before, during and after pregnancy is essential to help offset the depletion of nutrients throughout pregnancy and may help reduce the rate of depression in women before and after giving birth.

To sum it up, good nutrition is the foundation to enhanced physical and mental health. A diet rich in healthier, whole, unprocessed foods has a protective effect against depression. Focus on increasing intake of omega-3 fats, B vitamins, fish, lean meats, nuts, dark leafy greens, vegetables and fruits and soon you will begin to both look and feel better.



PREGNANT: With baby number two on the way the quality of what she eats will be on the mind of Amy Huberman