Healthy Eating to Support Your Mental Health

Evidence supports that good nutrition is important for our mental health, and that the foods you eat affect your daily mood and energy.

Eat regular meals and snacks
Make sure you eat at least three meals each day. Missing meals, especially breakfast, leads to low blood sugar and this causes low mood, irritability and fatigue. If you feel hungry, anxious, unfocused or shaky, between meals you may need to include healthy snacks such as a protein bar, a sandwich, a piece of fruit, cut vegetable pieces, string cheese, nuts or wholegrain crackers.

Avoid sugar
Eat fewer high sugar foods and more wholegrain cereals, nuts, beans, lentils, fruit and vegetables. Sugary foods are absorbed quickly into the bloodstream. This may cause an initial ‘high’ or surge of energy that soon wears off as the body increases its insulin production, leaving you feeling tired, low or even anxious.

Sugar and sugary drinks, cakes, sweets and puddings are loaded with calories but have little nutritional value and may trigger mood swings because of their sugar content.

Include protein in your diet
Include protein at every meal to ensure a continuous supply of the amino acids which are the building blocks for neurotransmitters (serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine), and can influence our mood, energy, appetite and sleep. Proteins help keep moods stable. We also need to eat enough protein to maintain our skin, organ, muscle and immune function.

Choose lean meat, poultry without the skin, fish, beans, tofu, cottage cheese, Greek yogurt or nuts.

Eat the right carbohydrates – breads, fruits and vegies
Wholegrain cereals, fruit and vegetables are more filling than refined carbohydrates like white breads, muffins, donuts, and candy. The sugars in the whole grains, fruits and vegetables are absorbed more slowly so they don’t cause mood swings like the refined ones.

Try to eat at least 5 portions (more is even better) of fruits and vegetables a day. A portion is roughly ½ cup or a medium piece of fresh fruit. Fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins, minerals and health-protective phytonutrients. They are also filling and relatively lower in calories to help maintain a healthy weight.

Grains provide many vitamins and minerals including B vitamins and minerals like magnesium that have been associated with control of mood and anxiety. Eating the foods is best, but even supplements of some vitamins and minerals have been shown to improve the mood of people with depression in research studies.

Healthier choices:
- bread – wholegrain rather than white. Also try rye breads, pumpernickel, rice cakes and corn cakes.
- breakfast cereals – choose high fiber, low sugar types like wholegrain or bran cereals or hot cereal like oatmeal which is far cheaper than dry cereals.
- rice and pasta – go for Basmati and brown rice and wholegrain pasta
- potatoes – try boiled new potatoes mashed with their skins, baked potato wedges (lightly brushed with olive oil), baked sweet potatoes or yams which are delicious and add variety.
Eat a wide variety of foods
Eat a wide variety of foods to keep your diet interesting and to ensure that you obtain all the micronutrients you need. The more varied your diet, the more likely you are to obtain all the nutrients you need.

Make sure you include at least 2-3 portions of different fruits and/or vegetables and a protein food at each meal. Eat all different colors to get a range of phytonutrients.

Include fish in your diet
Include more omega 3-rich oily fish from sustainable fish stocks – try to include 2–4 portions a week. If buying canned fish (sardines, herring, salmon), choose varieties in water, brine or tomato sauce rather than in sunflower oil which is high in omega 6.

If you don’t like fish try an omega 3 supplement (choose one that is purified and has a high eicosapentanoic acid (EPA) content). If you are vegetarian, you can try a flax seed supplement, but only a very small fraction of the omega 3 contained in plant products can be used by the body.

Maintain a healthy weight.
Depression affects different people in different ways. Some people lose interest in food or can’t motivate themselves to shop and cook, so lose weight. Others find they want to eat more (esp sweets) and gain weight when they are unhappy. Some medications can also increase or decrease your appetite.

Both excessive weight loss or weight gain can make your mood worse and so staying at a healthy weight is best. Unhealthy diets and lack of good nutrition will deprive the brain of glucose and the other nutrients that control mood. You may need the advice of a dietitian to help you overcome this problem. Nutrition help is available at CSULB.

Putting on weight unintentionally or feeling out of control with your eating can increase your depression and can lead to yo-yo dieting, which leaves you further out of control. If you are overweight, follow the advice on healthy eating and be extra careful to limit your fat and sugar intake (no fries, pies, cakes, puddings, sweets, chocolate or sweet drinks), use less fat in cooking, reduce your alcohol consumption, avoid sugary drinks, and increase your exercise levels.

Maintain adequate fluid intake and avoid caffeine
Not drinking enough fluid has significant implications for mental health. The even mild dehydration can affect our feelings and behavior.

An adult loses approximately 2.5 liters of water daily through the lungs as water vapor, through the skin as perspiration and through the kidneys as urine. If you don’t drink enough fluids to replace this loss then you will get symptoms of dehydration, including irritability, loss of concentration, headaches or reduced mental functioning. Warmer weather and exercise increase the amount of water we lose each day.

Coffee, colas, energy drinks and tea all contain caffeine, which some people use to boost energy levels. However, caffeine can increase blood pressure, anxiety, depressive symptoms and sleep problems. Some people are sensitive to even small amounts of caffeine. Caffeine stays in the body for about 10-12 hours. Caffeine causes the body to lose more water.

If you do take drinks with caffeine in them, try to limit yourself to just 1 cup per day, preferably in the morning, and drink other fluids such as water, fruit juice and non-stimulant herbal teas at other times. Chocolate also contains caffeine and should be limited to an occasional treat.
Limit your alcohol intake.
Alcohol has a depressant effect on the brain and can result in a worsening of your mood. It is also a toxin that has to be cleared by the liver. During this detoxification process the body uses thiamin, zinc and other nutrients, and this can deplete your reserves, especially if your diet is poor.

Thiamin and other vitamin deficiencies are common in heavy drinkers and can cause low mood, irritability and/or aggressive behavior, as well as more serious and long-term mental health problems.

Because of alcohol's depressant effects, those with mood issues should consider stopping alcohol use until they recover, and then drinking only small amounts (1-2 drinks), no more than once a week to prevent a recurrence of mood problems.

Consider adding a daily multiple vitamin tablet
Diets may be lacking certain vitamins and minerals. Although vitamins cannot make up for a poor diet, and eating healthy is always best, a vitamin is an affordable "insurance policy" against a deficiency that may worsen your mood, focus or energy.

Healthy eating on a budget
A healthy diet can be more expensive. Fish, fruit and vegetables can be particularly pricey. However, by cutting down on coffee, sugary drinks and snacks, eating out, and alcohol, you can save money so you can buy healthier foods.

Frozen fruit and vegetables are often cheaper than fresh produce and are usually just as good nutritionally. Fresh fruit and vegetables are usually cheapest when they are in season. Beans, lentils and tofu are also cheaper than meat and just as nutritious.

For more information check out choosemyplate.gov. This is what a balanced plate looks like...lots more fruit and vegetables and less grains than most people eat!