Mental health including anxiety and depression

Key points

- What you eat can affect how you feel.
- A healthy diet and other positive lifestyle habits such as exercise are the foundations for better mental health.
- Eating a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, wholegrains, legumes, and oily fish is linked to improved mental health.
- A healthy diet can feed our gut bacteria, improve gut health and help lower inflammation. These are linked to better mental health.

On this page

Details

When to see a dietitian

Top tips

Details

3 minute read

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental health conditions in the world. Counselling and medications are the cornerstone of managing many mental health problems. But now we are discovering that what we eat can also have an important role.

A nutritious diet is not just good for your body. It is good for your brain and mental health too. A healthy diet is linked with better stress management, concentration and improved mental health.

How food and mood are related is a two-way street. What you eat can affect your mood, but your mood also influences what you choose to eat. You're more likely to make positive food choices when you're in a good headspace.

When you're feeling stressed or depressed, it can mean turning to 'comfort food' to feel better. However, some of these easy-to-buy foods are highly processed and rich in sugar, salt and fat. Be aware that these foods will not benefit your mental health.

Good nutrition is crucial in helping to improve the outlook of people experiencing problems with their mental health. And with each new research study published, we are learning more about how diet can influence mental health.

The role of inflammation and our gut bacteria

There are many ways diet can affect our mental health. One way is through the process of inflammation. Short-term acute inflammation is how the body responds to injury or infection. This type of inflammation is protective and is not related to mental health.

Chronic inflammation is a different matter. It can contribute to the development of many health problems including depression. Lack of exercise, stress, poor sleep, smoking and an unhealthy diet can all contribute to chronic inflammation.

Diet is a key element in influencing inflammation. And here, a Mediterranean-style diet has been gaining traction as a way to improve mental health and lower inflammation.

A Mediterranean-style diet includes a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, legumes, seeds, nuts, herbs and spices and olive oil. It also features fish and poultry over red meat. This way of eating is consistently associated with a reduced risk of depression. It has even been used to successfully treat people with severe depression.

Healthy eating also means a well-fed and more diverse population of microbes in our gut. The gut has a two-way communication link with the central nervous system. We call this the gut-brain axis. Science is now uncovering just how much influence our gut microbes can have on our mental health.

Fruits, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes provide us with fibre. Fibre and other plant nutrients are essential to support a healthy gut and keeping a good balance of healthy microbes. These same foods also give us a wide range of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants to support brain health. So, the benefits of eating well multiply.

Healthy eating choices

As recently as 2020, the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists updated their clinical practice guidelines for mood disorders. They now make specific recommendations around diet. Diet and other positive lifestyle habits such as exercise are rightly considered the foundation for the treatment of mental health.

There is no single diet that is the 'best' way to eat for mental health. There are many different approaches to eating healthier. A Mediterranean-style diet is one that features prominently. The theme of this dietary pattern can be applied to many ways of eating.

> *Healthy eating habits for good mental health can be summed up with two pieces of advice.*
>
> 1. *Eat plenty of vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, fish and seafood.*
> 2. *Eat less red meat and less highly processed foods and added sugars.*

Tips for eating well for your mental health.

- Eat plenty of high-fibre fruits and vegetables in place of more highly processed convenience snack foods.
- Make smart swaps by choosing wholegrain foods over more highly refined grains. Choose wholegrain bread over white bread. Swap white rice for brown rice or popular grains like quinoa. Choose foods where wholegrains are listed high up in the ingredient list.
- Go for healthier fats like those found in avocados, seeds, nuts, salmon, avocados, canola oil and olive oil.
- Eat less red meat. Try swapping it for chicken or fish. Or maybe include some of the many varieties of legumes. Lentils, kidney beans, chickpeas or tofu all make great choices.

A type of fat called omega-3 is important for improved mental health. Oily fish are high in these omega-3s. Good choices of oily fish include:

- salmon
- blue-eye trevalla
- blue mackerel
- herring
- canned sardines
- canned salmon.

Diet and mental health is a rapidly growing field of research. But what is considered a positive diet for mental health is not far removed from what broad dietary guidelines have promoted for decades.

When to see a dietitian

Eating well is a vital part of looking after your mental health. An Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help you meet your individual needs.

We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- are struggling to make dietary changes that are linked with positive mental health
- would like personalised advice and support from a professional.

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They can help you with personalised, easy-to-follow and evidence-based advice.

APDs are Australia's most trusted dietetics professionals.

Find a dietitian

Top tips

- If you are struggling with your mental health, then reach out for help. Speak with your doctor or other health professional.
- It can be hard to eat well when you are feeling down. Understand that each positive step you take to eating better is a step in the right direction for your mental health.
- Fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, nuts, legumes and fish are the cornerstone of a diet for good mental health.

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in March 2022.