Dietitians call on the Government to recognise the role of diet for mental health and brain health

Dietitians Australia is urging the Government to act on the significant body of evidence showing that eating well reduces the risk of depression, and that depression and anxiety can be treated with dietary intervention, through supporting Australians with better access to dietitians.

It comes as the second gathering of the Parliamentary Friends of Nutrition Group congregates at Australian Parliament House today to hear from pioneering Australian, Alfred Deakin Professor of Nutritional Psychiatry Felice Jacka OAM, Director of the Food & Mood Centre at Deakin University.

“There is a growing body of high-quality evidence that shows what we eat profoundly affects, not only our physical health, but also our mental and brain health,” Dietitians Australia President Tara Diversi said.

“One in five Australians are estimated to experience a mental health condition in any given year, but we know that only a small percentage of the population have a food intake that meets the recommended dietary guidelines.

“Unlocking the potential of improved food intake and nutrition is an imperative opportunity for improving mental health and wellbeing of Australians,” Ms Diversi said.

Professor of Nutritional Psychiatry and founder of the International Society for Nutritional Psychiatry Research, Felice Jacka OAM, says diet is critical in improving mental and brain health outcomes in Australians.

“The evidence from Australia and around the world now points to a clear and consistent link between diet quality and the risk for depression, as well as anxiety, independent of income, education, body weight, and other important factors.

“Healthier diets that are higher in whole foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grain cereals, beans and legumes, nuts and seeds, fish and olive oil are consistently associated with an almost 35% reduced risk of depression,” Professor Jacka explains.

“On the other hand, unhealthy diets high in manufactured foods such as sugar-sweetened drinks, fried foods, pastries, donuts, packaged snacks, and ultra-processed and refined cereals, are consistently linked to a higher risk of depression.

Critically, these associations are seen across the life course, including in children, with unhealthy dietary exposures early in life linked to worse emotional and behavioural health as well as neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD.

“Studies, including our SMILES trial – the first clinical trial for diet in the treatment of mental illness – show that people with even severe clinical depressive illness who receive nutrition support and guidance from an Accredited Practising Dietitian can profoundly improve their depression, as well as anxiety. This research has also shown that a dietary approach to treating depressive illness is highly cost-effective.

“Given that poor diet is now the leading cause of illness and early death across the globe, and that depression and other mental disorders account for a major cause of disability, this evidence provides new and profoundly important opportunities for both prevention and treatment.

“The Food and Mood Centre is recognised as the leader in Nutritional Psychiatry research internationally, leading the landmark studies in the field.

The evidence in Nutritional Psychiatry has now been cited in more than 100 high level policy documents globally, with the 2022 WHO World Mental Health Report for the first time listing unhealthy diet as a risk factor for mental illness.

In fact, the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrist’s clinical guidelines now include improving diet as foundational to the treatment of depressive illnesses; however, most psychiatrists or GPs are not adequately trained to deliver dietary support to their patients.

“Personalised dietary and nutrition assessment, advice and counselling from nutrition professionals is vital to ensuring people can truly harness the power food can have on their mental and brain health.

“To be in the best possible position to achieve this, Australians must have improved access to Accredited Practising Dietitians,” Professor Jacka said.

For interviews:

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Note to Editors: Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics, representing dietitians nationally and advocating for healthier communities. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia.