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Feeding good mental health is key for young Australians

As we count down to World Mental Health Day tomorrow, and with final exams for Year 12 students just around the corner, now's the perfect time to consider the connection between healthy food choices and the mental wellbeing of young Australians.

"It's been a tough year, and we feel for the thousands of young Australians who will soon be sitting their final exams," said Simone Austin, Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) and Senior Dietetic Advisor at Dietitians Australia.

With Australians aged between 15-24 years most likely to experience a mental or behavioural condition¹, building healthy food habits from a young age is vital.

"There are many ways foods affect how we feel and there is growing evidence to support the impact that nutrients, food and dietary patterns, like a Mediterranean style of eating, has on mental health. Choosing nourishing food and drinks can keep us feeling energised, alert and sustained; useful for long exams and hours of study," said Simone.

While your first reaction might be to reach for foods like chocolate, chips or lollies when hunger strikes, these are energy dense and nutrient poor, and are likely to leave you feeling tired and sluggish in the long run.

Instead, eating wholefoods like fruit and vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, nuts, legumes, lean meats, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy means we're more likely to get a healthy dose of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fibre. These impact our gut and brain health, which in turn positively influence our mental health.

"For snack ideas to fuel your study session - why not go savoury over sweet and try wholegrain crackers with cheese and tomato, nuts or roasted legumes, like chickpeas. Also consider options you may not have thought about as snacks such as olives, fruit skewers, sliced apple topped with peanut butter, or veggie sticks with ricotta or dips like hummus or tzatziki. These are packed full of fibre, protein and healthy fats which help feed our gut and brain health," said Simone.

With 50-80% of our body comprising water², staying hydrated is important to keep functioning at your best.

"Often we turn to caffeinated drinks for a 'pick-me-up', but too much caffeine, particularly close to bedtime, can affect sleep and may leave us feeling anxious and jittery. Gaining adequate sleep is vital for mental health, more than people think – so where possible, make water your drink of choice."

"Much like elite athletes, preparing for an exam is like preparing for game day. Staying hydrated and getting enough sleep is vital to help both players and students alike, perform at their best."

While food is mostly talked about in terms of nutrition – it's important to remember that it can be nourishing in more ways than one. Learning lifelong skills in preparing and cooking food as well as connecting with friends and family over a meal are just some examples.

"The benefits of good food (and a good mood) extend far beyond boosting your brain health for your final marks. If you're after support about how to eat to increase your physical and mental performance connect with your local Accredited Practising Dietitian," said Simone.

For media enquiries and interviews, contact Pattie King, Dietitians Australia 0409 661 920.

¹Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). Mental Health. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/mental-health>

²National Health and Medical Research Council (2014). Nutrient Reference values: Water. Available from: <https://www.nrv.gov.au/nutrients/water>

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Note to Editors: Dietitians Australia (DA) is the leading voice of nutrition in Australia, 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. For more information, including DA's media releases and position on topical nutrition issues, visit www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au.