

## **Eating for Mental Well-being**

We know that what we eat will affect the health of our body. One overlooked aspect of mental health is nutrition. Food plays a significant role in not only our physical health but our mental and emotional health as well. Food is important for keeping the brain fueled and operating. The foods we eat affect how well our brains function and impact our moods and ability to focus.

Eating well can make you feel good and help keep you mentally well. The components of foods can affect cognition, influence mood, and change physical states.

Research tells us that food choice is influenced by how we feel. Studies have shown that feeling low, anxious, or stressed can make us more likely to reach for high carbohydrate, sugary, or salty foods. Unfortunately, many Americans are experiencing increased symptoms because our desired diet is high in sugars and processed foods with a very low intake of fruits, vegetables, fish, and lean proteins.

High intake of sweet beverages and snacks, and low fruit and vegetable intake are linked to negative mood. High intake of refined carbohydrates and saturated fats increases the risk of depression.

Foods linked with chronic diseases are also linked with depression and other mental disorders. Those with chronic depression and anxiety experience increased heart rate and blood pressure, and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Using foods to feel better may help with negative emotions; however, this has only a temporary effect. Our ability to taste sweet is reduced when we are stressed, which can contribute to seeking out more of these foods.

Comfort foods are foods associated with good thoughts, good feelings, and happy memories. They have been known to evoke a sense of well-being and decrease the perception of loneliness. Comfort foods are usually high in sugar or refined carbohydrates.

These behaviors contribute to blood sugar spikes and subsequent crashes, which result in irritability, sugar cravings, and depression. They can also lead to recurring negative feelings, weight gain, and depression associated with low self-control and poor body image.

The good news is that research also suggests that a change in diet choices could help to reduce the length and severity of mental illness symptoms. Even a small change can greatly impact mental health over time. Commit today to make a change and continue to build on that change step by step. You will love the change to your body and mind!

When possible, obtain your nutrient sources through healthy foods. The food quality you eat can impact your overall well-being. Eating to promote your mental health is similar to eating to support your physical health. Making large dietary changes can be difficult. Attempt to slowly integrate one or more of these tips to help you feel better:

- To prevent your blood sugar levels from dropping, eat regularly.
- Focus on drinking more water and less sugary drinks.

- Eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Consume fish at least one time per week.
- Include some protein with every meal.
- Add high-fiber foods such as whole grains, nuts, seeds, beans, fruits, and vegetables containing fiber.
- Eat healthy fats found in olive oil, nuts, seeds, oily fish, avocados, milk, and eggs.
- Choose foods that are low in added sugar.

Avoiding unhealthy foods and eating healthy ones should be a priority. A nutrient-rich, healthy diet is one way you can improve your mental health.