

How food can affect your mood

Ever get that 'hangry' feeling? We all know that food can affect how we feel, but scientists are discovering that it may be having a bigger impact on our moods than we think

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Decades of research has explored how our food choices impact us physically. And recently, experts have also been uncovering how what we eat could affect our mental and emotional well-being, too.

A study of more than 12,000 Australians conducted by the University of Queensland has found that those who increased their daily fruit and vegetable intake reported increased happiness and higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being. To put that into perspective, this level of fulfillment was equated to the mental lift an unemployed person feels after getting a job.

It's a finding supported by the research of Professor Felice Jacka, director of the Food & Mood Centre at Victoria's Deakin University. "Over the past 10 years we have conducted several studies that have shown people who eat a healthier diet are 30 per cent less likely to have a low mood," she explains.

Through her research, Jacka has found that mood-boosting foods include fruit, vegetables, legumes, fish and lean proteins, wholegrain cereals, nuts and seeds, and foods rich in omega 3s. "Not only do these foods contain the nutrients needed for optimal functioning of the body and brain, they're also high in fibre, which is essential for gut microbiota," she says. "We're increasingly understanding that the gut is the driver of health, including mental health."

THE GUT CONNECTION

The gut and brain are more similar than we may think, and they signal each other through our nervous system. Like the

brain, the gut produces 'feel-good' hormones serotonin, dopamine and gamma-aminobutyric acid.

In fact, it's estimated that 90 per cent of serotonin is made in the digestive tract—so it makes sense that a healthy gut helps to influence a healthy mind.

FEEL-GOOD FOODS

While there's no one food that will boost your mood on its own, there are many that may help when eaten as part of a balanced diet. For example, eating tryptophan-rich foods, such as fish, chicken, turkey, eggs, beans, oats and cheese, helps create serotonin—which is involved in regulating mood and sleep.

Foods containing omega-3 fatty acids, such as oily varieties of fish, like trout and salmon, as well as nuts, seeds, olive oil and avocados, may also help decrease the risk of low mood.

"Omega 3s are known for their anti-inflammatory properties," explains nutritional psychiatry researcher Dr Sarah Dash. "They may work to reduce chronic inflammation, which has been linked to symptoms and behaviours like fatigue, withdrawal, and depression itself."

Studies also suggest that folic acid and other B vitamins may help boost mood and energy levels, as well as improve insomnia issues. They can be found in leafy green vegetables such as broccoli and spinach.

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VARIETY IS KEY

It's important not to get too caught up in labeling foods as 'good' or 'bad', and instead include a balanced variety in your meals. When you aren't denying or restricting yourself, you're not just benefiting your overall well-being, you're also giving yourself a mental high-five.

"Rather than cutting out specific foods or whole food groups because you view them as 'bad', it's best to learn how you can enjoy them in moderation without the emotional attachment," says WW Program Developer and dietitian Nicole Stride.

But it's not only what you eat that can impact your mood: it's also *how* you do it. For example, if you leave hunger for too long, chances are your mood will slump along with your energy levels. To help prevent this, eat regular meals and snacks throughout the day and choose foods such as wholegrain

pasta, rice and cereals that release energy slowly.

"It's also a good idea to learn how to be more mindful of your hunger and fullness levels as this will help you better manage your energy and mood throughout the day," says Stride.

Additionally, try to eat breakfast, enjoy smaller portions throughout the day rather than just large ones at lunch and dinner.

"Get creative in the kitchen and add variety by incorporating different coloured vegetables into dinners where you can," suggests Stride. "You could try grating extra zucchini and carrot into your bolognese sauce, or picking out a new recipe each week from the WW cookbooks or website."

Last, but certainly not least, it's also important to remember to keep your daily water intake up. One study found even mild dehydration may alter your mood, energy level and sleep patterns.

GOOD MOOD FOODS

- High-fibre foods, including vegetables, fruit, legumes and wholegrains, such as brown rice, oats, quinoa and barley
- Foods that contain healthy fats, including oily fish, nuts, seeds and avocados
- Tryptophan-rich foods, such as eggs, chicken, beans, oats and cheese
- Foods high in folic acid and vitamin B, such as broccoli and spinach



FOODS THAT MAY LOWER MOOD

- Packaged processed foods and meats
- Foods with a higher sugar content, such as cakes and biscuits
- Fast food
- Foods containing trans fats or hydrogenated oil
- Alcohol
- Sugary drinks, such as soft drink ☹️