



Feeding your brain with a healthy balanced diet can have a really positive effect on your mental health. A healthy balanced diet will consist of proteins, healthy fats, complex carbohydrates, including fruit and vegetables, and water.

Read on for information about why each of these elements are important, and the foods in which it is best to find them.

*With best wishes from
Hannah and the Project Food team*

Food and Mood—proteins, fats and carbohydrates

Proteins

The neurotransmitters in our brains – the chemical messengers that transport our thoughts and feelings – are made from amino acids, which come from the proteins in our diet.

A low intake of certain amino acids can lead to depression, anxiety, apathy and a lack of motivation. These amino acids include tryptophan, which is converted into a neurotransmitter called serotonin.

Foods such as tuna, turkey, eggs, avocado and the humble chickpea all have good levels of tryptophan, so these can help to raise your mood.

Having too much alcohol can, on the other hand, reduce your serotonin levels and make you feel depressed in the long term.

Healthy fats

Fat is really important for brain function, but different types of fat have different effects on the brain – some positive, and others negative.

Omega 3 is a fat that has been linked with good brain function, and a 2009 study showed that it could improve depressive symptoms in both children and adults.

Omega 3 is found in oily fish (salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines and herring), chia seeds and flax seeds, as well as in fish oil supplements.

On the other hand, Omega 6 is a fat that has been linked with inflammation in the brain and may lead to depression. Omega 6 is found in vegetable oils such as sunflower oil, corn oil and soybean oils – and in processed foods.



Fats continued...

Eating too much saturated fat (and sugar) has been shown to lead to depressive, anxious and compulsive behaviour. Cutting down on 'junk' foods - like burgers, chips, chocolate, cakes and biscuits - could lift your mood and improve your mental health.



Carbohydrates

Your brain will not work properly without a good supply of energy - which it gets from glucose. The brain uses 20% of all the energy needed by the body! A lack of glucose can make you feel weak, tired and unable to concentrate. Glucose comes mainly from the carbohydrates we eat, and carbohydrates are found in foods like cereals, bread, rice, potatoes, sugars, and fruits and vegetables.

Your brain will work best if it has a slow, steady supply of glucose - which you can get from healthier sources of carbohydrates like wholegrains (brown bread, brown pasta and brown rice), vegetables, fruits, legumes (beans and lentils) and lower fat dairy. Refined carbohydrates - like sugar, white rice, pasta and bread, and the carbohydrates found in processed foods and energy drinks - release glucose into your bloodstream very quickly, and then cause it to dip shortly afterwards. This 'crash' can have a negative effect on mood as well as energy.



A recent study showed that a group of people with moderate to severe depression felt significantly better when they ate more wholegrain foods and ate less processed foods, sugar and fried foods.

Water

Water makes up about 80% of the brain and is essential to it functioning well. Initial symptoms of dehydration include restless or irritable behaviour as well as weakness. The early effects of even mild dehydration affect feelings of wellbeing, performance and learning and in the long term carry a higher risk of a number of health problems.



Overall, the best diet for your mental health will include:

- More fruit and vegetables
- Less junk food and fried food
- Less white bread, pasta and rice - have wholemeal instead
- Less sugar
- More healthy fats - nuts, eggs, seeds, good quality red meats, oily fish