Impact of foods on mental health

Did you know that what we eat doesn't just affect our physical health; it can affect our mood and emotional well-being as well?

A healthy, balanced diet helps your brain to stay alert and provides nutrients and energy to keep moving throughout your day. Without proper fuel from the foods we eat, our bodies, including our brain, cannot function well. Making sure your diet provides enough healthy carbohydrates, protein, essential fats, vitamins and minerals can adequately nourish the brain. A nutritious diet can also help protect your brain from harmful free radicals (which the body produces when it uses oxygen). This can influence your mood in a positive way.

On the flip side, eating an unhealthy diet can negatively affect the brain. Studies show that diets high in refined sugars may worsen symptoms of mental health issues, such as depression. Consuming processed foods can also make you feel sluggish and tired.

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Following these healthy eating tips can help boost your mood and overall health:

- **Focus on wholesome foods.** Eat a balanced diet rich in a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean sources of protein and low-fat and nonfat dairy products. Strive to eat foods from all food groups. If you don't get a variety of foods in your diet, it can be more difficult to get all the essential nutrients you need. Low levels of zinc, iron, B vitamins, magnesium, and vitamin C are associated with worsening mood and decreased energy.
- **Eat regularly.** One of the best ways to improve your mood is to have regular meals and snacks. Eating every three to four hours will ensure there's enough fuel in your system to keep your energy levels up. With more energy, you'll likely feel better. Along with getting the right balance of essential fats, make sure each meal contains both protein and healthy sources of carbohydrates, such as vegetables and whole grains. Both protein and carbs help your body make the brain chemical serotonin, which can help you feel calm and happy.
- **Limit refined (highly-processed) carbohydrates.** Refined carbs, like baked goods, candy, chips, white rice or bread and sugary drinks, reach your bloodstream quickly. This causes your blood sugar to spike temporarily. You may feel a quick burst of energy for an hour or so after eating these foods, but then your blood sugar falls rapidly, which can leave you with low energy and irritability.
- **Choose foods that contain omega-3 fatty acids.** Omega-3 fatty acids are essential, unsaturated fats that your body needs to work well. Some studies show that omega-3s may have a positive effect on mood and help combat depression. Omega-3s are mostly found in fatty fish, like salmon, herring and mackerel.

Eating a nutritious diet can keep you energized and help you to feel your best. While good nutrition is an important component of your emotional well-being, it is not a substitute for proper medical care and treatment. If you have concerns about your mental health, talk to your health care provider.

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