

Which foods do I need to eat in order to feel well?

The most vital substance for a healthy mind and body is water.

It's easy to overlook drinking the recommended six to eight glasses, per day, which is a low-cost, convenient, self-help measure that can quickly change how we feel, mentally as well as physically.

Having a minimum of five portions, daily, of fresh fruit and vegetables (organically grown, if possible) provides the nutrients needed to nourish mind and body. (One portion equals about a handful.)

It's best not to skip breakfast, to keep regular meal times, and to choose foods that release energy slowly, such as oats and unrefined whole grains. It's also important to eat some protein foods, such as meat, fish, beans, eggs, cheese, nuts or seeds, every day. As well as providing nutrients, these eating strategies help smooth the negative effects of fluctuating blood sugar levels, which include irritability, poor concentration, fatigue, depression and food cravings.

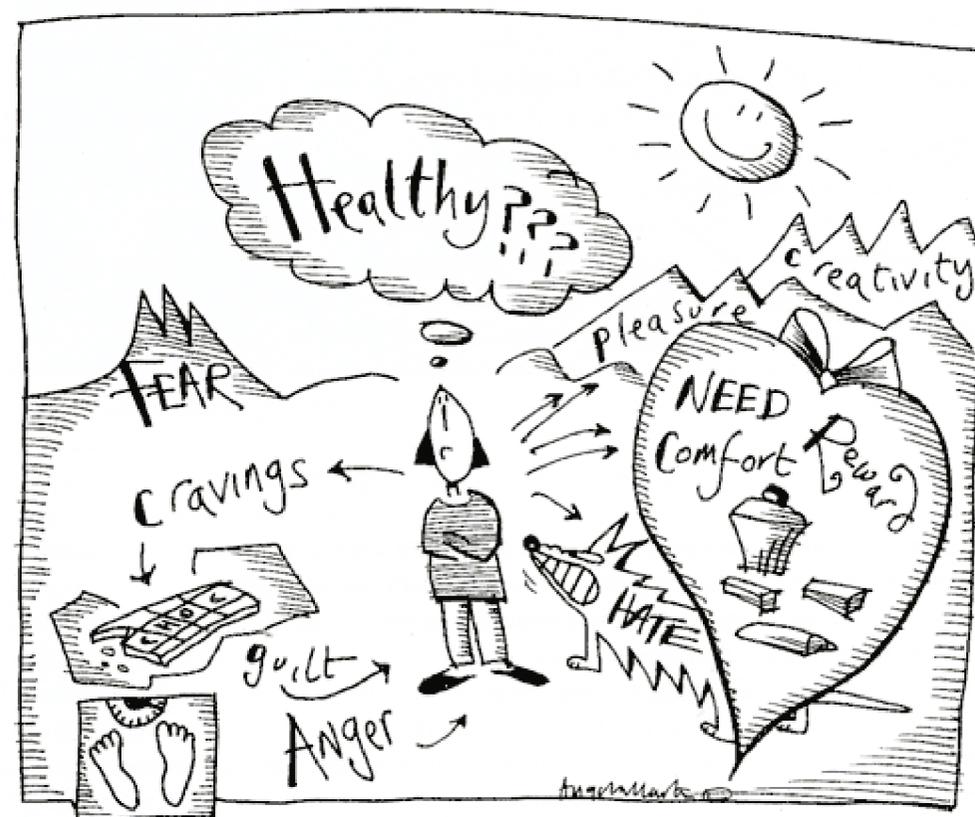
Essential fatty acids, particularly the omega-3 type found in oil-rich fish, such as mackerel and sardines, linseeds (flax), hemp seeds and their oils, are vital for the formation and healthy functioning of the brain. Other seeds and nuts, such as sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, brazil nuts and walnuts, also contain important 'good mood' nutrients.

Food and mood plate – its all about balance:



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How does food affect mood?



How does food affect mood?

There are many explanations for the cause-and-effect relationship between food and mood. The following are some examples:

- Fluctuations in blood sugar levels are associated with changes in mood and energy, and are affected by what we eat.
- Brain chemicals (neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, dopamine and acetylcholine) influence the way we think, feel and behave. They can be affected by what we've eaten.
- There can be abnormal reactions to artificial chemicals in foods, such as artificial colourings and flavourings.
- There are reactions that can be due to the deficiency of an enzyme needed to digest a food. Lactase, for instance, is needed to digest lactose (milk sugar). Without it, a milk intolerance can build up.
- People can become hypersensitive to foods. This can cause what are known as delayed or hidden food allergies or sensitivities.
- Low levels of vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids can affect mental health, with some symptoms associated with particular nutritional deficiencies. For example, links have been demonstrated between low levels of certain B-vitamins and symptoms of schizophrenia, low levels of the mineral zinc and eating disorders, and low levels of omega-3 oils and depression.
- A build-up of toxins from the environment, such as lead from traffic pollution or mercury from leaky amalgam fillings, can also affect the proper functioning of the body and brain.

Example:

Let us take a look at protein. Say you are feeling tired and still have half the day to go. The best thing to do is have a high-protein snack. Protein contains an amino acid known as tyrosine. Once tyrosine enters your system, it stimulates the release of dopamine and epinephrine, which are two neurotransmitters that increase energy and alertness. Another benefit of protein is that it balances blood sugar levels so you don't get the fluctuations that can cause you to feel energetic one minute and tired the next.

What is the psychological relationship?

It's generally accepted that how we feel can influence what we choose to eat or drink (mood to food).

What is less well known is how what we eat can affect our mental functioning (food to mood).

The use of caffeine is one example of what is a complex relationship. Caffeine, found in tea, coffee, cola drinks and chocolate, is probably the most widely used behaviour-modifying drug in the world.

We often choose to drink it if we are feeling tired and irritable, because it can give us a boost and help us to concentrate. Having a cup of coffee or tea also has a lot of positive psychological associations. We meet a friend for 'coffee and a chat' or give ourselves a break by sitting down with a cup of tea, and these things are very important.

But too much caffeine (which is a different amount for each of us) can cause symptoms, such as anxiety, nervousness and depression.

Any exploration into food and mood needs to take into account this two-way relationship and include the psychological aspect behind what we are choosing to eat.

How do I find out if food is affecting my mental health?

Before investigating the specific foods that could be affecting your mental and emotional health, it's well worth having a look at what you are already eating and drinking.

Usually, the most reliable way of doing this is to keep a food and drink diary every day, for about one week. It seems to work best if you can write down what you eat and drink, at the time you have it. The more information you include in your diary, the more useful it is likely to be; for example, you could also note down the time and the approximate amounts you consume.

People are often surprised when they look back over what they have eaten. Greater awareness is an important first step forward.