



Anglia Ruskin
University

Student Services
Counselling and Wellbeing Service

How does food affect our mood?



A self help information leaflet explaining the links between:

- The foods we eat
- How we feel emotionally and physically
- Tips on maintaining an overall healthy lifestyle

Recent research and healthy eating initiatives has recognised connections between the food we eat and how we feel emotionally and physically.

Our diet is extremely important not only for our ongoing physical health but also our psychological health, which can enable us to maintain healthy brain development and functioning in day to day life.



Nutrition can play an important role in the prevention and management of many kinds of difficulties with behaviour, learning and mood. Research indicates that good nutritional intake may be linked to academic success.

A number of studies report that by eating a nutritional breakfast, this can improve daily and long-term academic performance. This can include:

- Everyday difficulties in behaviour including ability to process new information, our concentration, sleep patterns, memory recall and motivation levels. It may also affect our ability to learn and can cause mood swings.
- Common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression can also be exacerbated from insufficient water intake and constant fluctuating blood sugar levels.

Our eating habits are considerably different from previous generations. Food production and its manufacturing processes combined with changing lifestyles, and increasing access to processed foods mean that our intake of fresh, nutritious, local produce is much lower, whilst our intake of fat, sugar, alcohol and additives is much higher.

Sugary foods are absorbed quickly into the bloodstream which in the short term provides an initial surge of energy, however this wears off very quickly as the body increases its insulin production, resulting in lethargy and feelings of low mood, irritability or heightened anxiety.

A wide range of mentally healthy recipes to feed your mind can be found at [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) to inspire you to include a variety of foods into your diet.





Top ten tips for healthy eating and wellbeing

We can achieve a balanced mood and overall feelings of physical and emotional wellbeing by ensuring that our diet provides adequate amounts of complex carbohydrates, essential fats, amino acids, vitamins, minerals and water.

1. Ensure you eat smaller regular meals throughout the day to maintain your blood sugar levels.
2. Eat fewer high sugar foods (such as sweets, fast food, cakes, crisps) and more wholegrain cereals, nuts, beans, lentils, fruit and vegetables.
3. Eat high fibre, low sugar cereals which are slow release energy foods that leave you feeling fuller for longer i.e. wholegrain, bran cereals or porridge.
4. Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. This can include a glass of “not from concentrate” juice, freshly made smoothies from fresh fruits, and snacks could include a piece of fruit.
5. Include protein at every main meal to ensure a continuous supply of the amino acid tryptophan to the brain, as research suggests this can help improve feeling of depression. You can make sure tryptophan is incorporated into your diet by eating meat, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, nuts, beans, lentils (dhal), or a meat substitute such as textured vegetable protein.
6. If you stir fry any food make sure you use an oil that is high in monounsaturates such as olive or rapeseed oil.

7. Getting a good balance of omega 3 and 6 oils can help to maintain a healthy heart and lower feelings of depression. It's recommended by the NHS that eating oily fish twice a week such as mackerel, salmon, sardines or fresh tuna can be a good source of Omega 3.
8. Introducing a wide variety of foods to keep your diet interesting helps make sure you're receiving all the nutrients you'll need to maintain an overall healthy wellbeing.
9. Eating some red meat and/or fish provides us with excellent sources of vitamin B12, another nutrient that is associated with our mood. If you're vegetarian or have a limited budget, include fortified soy mince (i.e. quorn) and yeast extract to increase your intake of this vitamin.
10. Ensure you are hydrating yourself with water and other health drinks such as herbal teas and natural fruit juices at regular intervals. If we're not drinking enough throughout the day, it can have a significant impact upon our mental health. The early effects of even mild dehydration can affect our emotions, thought processes and behaviour.

Other useful tips

Many people don't realise that alcohol has a depressant effect on the brain and can result in lowering your mood and heightening anxiety. It is also a toxin that has to be deactivated by the liver. During this detoxification process the body uses thiamine, zinc and other nutrients which can deplete your nutrient reserves, especially if you aren't maintaining a balanced diet.

The current recommended alcohol limit is two units a day for women and three units for men. For further information around units or alcohol use visit [drinkaware.co.uk](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk)



5 top tips for eating on a budget

1. Make a list before you go shopping and stick to what is on your list
2. Shop when you feel full. Never go shopping when you are hungry as it can be tempting to go with your stomach and not your brain
3. Shop together with flatmates so you can take advantage of the buy one get one free offers
4. Plan meals in advance to avoid waste and only buy what you need for each planned meal
5. Shop less frequently and do a large shop once a month whilst setting aside money for weekly smaller shopping i.e. for fresh fruit and vegetables.

For more information visit: anglia.ac.uk/cheapaschips

Physical exercise

Physical exercise is great for our physical and mental health too. Exercise helps us to release naturally produced chemicals in the brain, known as endorphins. Exercise also enables the production of neurotransmitters or “serotonin”, which help us to feel more positive and relaxed. Many people describe feeling “euphoric” after a run, or intense exercise, which is often referred to as a “runner’s high,” and can be accompanied by a fulfilling outlook on life. Regular exercise can also boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate, sleep, and feel much better overall.

For more information or general support on getting more physically active please contact Sport and Active Anglia.

01245 684321 | 01233 698189

active@anglia.ac.uk

anglia.ac.uk/sport

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For further information please access the following websites for details on:

- Nutrients that promote good mental health, mentally healthy recipes and eating on a budget: **[mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)**
- Eat well and feel better: **[youngminds.org.uk](https://www.youngminds.org.uk)**
- Changing your diet and gaining support: **[mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)**
- Eating well and mental health: **[rcpsych.ac.uk](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)**
- Healthy eating and mental health: **[nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)** and search for 'Healthy eating'.
- Your local GP can also provide medical advice and support regarding healthy eating and dietary changes (we always recommend you consult your GP before you make any dietary changes as this could impact upon other current health conditions you may be experiencing).
- Recommendations for nutritional foods to improve memory, concentration and attention whilst lifting our mood can be found at **[mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)** and search 'Feeding minds'
- The Students against depression website also highlights how food affects mood. This website provides tips in eating yourself happier by making small steady changes within your eating habits **[studentsagainstdepression.org/tackle-depression](https://www.studentsagainstdepression.org/tackle-depression)**



Counselling and Wellbeing Service

01245 686700 | 01245 686701
wellbeing@anglia.ac.uk
anglia.ac.uk/wellbeing

Cambridge:
HEL341

Chelmsford:
2nd Floor, Tindal Building