

Food, mood and psychiatric treatments

The *MIND Food and Mood Project*¹ revealed that there is a relationship between ‘what you eat and how you feel’. Eating well is associated with lower anxiety levels, less depression, less mood swings, fewer cravings and eating problems such as binge eating and bulimia, reductions in pre-menstrual tension and less fatigue.

Eating well involves having a balanced and varied diet and having regular meals. It is the opposite of the diet/binge cycle (going long periods without food then succumbing to a binge). Starving oneself leads to low blood sugar and consequent apathy and low mood. It is often followed by cravings for high sugar foods such as chocolate and fizzy drinks, which cause a rapid escalation of blood sugar. This process can then lead to **cycles of highs and lows, ‘the shakes’, irritability and anger**. A diet that is relatively low in fat and salt, includes (preferably fresh and lightly cooked) vegetables, fresh fruit, high fibre foods, nuts and pulses and (for non-vegetarians) oily fish and lean meat, has regularly been shown to be associated with greater physical and psychological well-being. Above all else the consistent recommendation has been for people to have a **varied diet**.

Folic acid, which we get from *green vegetables, liver, wholemeal bread, cereals, rice, nuts and oranges*, is important. Deficiency has been linked to **depressed mood**. It has been estimated that 1/3-1/2 of all psychiatric patients are deficient in folate. Anti-convulsant drugs (e.g. carbamazepine) inhibit the body’s ability to absorb folate.

Iron is important to prevent anaemia, which causes fatigue, apathy and depressed mood. Low iron is associated with **anxiety, depression** and decreased motivation for exercise. 40% of women on low incomes have been shown to be low in iron.

Zinc, which is found in *shellfish and green leafy vegetables*, has a **calming** effect.

Deficiencies in **Vitamin B6** (which is found in *broccoli, lentils, nuts and bananas*) can lead to **irritability, depression, fatigue and learning problems**.

Vitamin B5 is known as the **anti-stress** vitamin. It is found in *eggs, kidneys, mushrooms and pork*.

Calcium and magnesium are natural tranquillisers and can help relieve **nervousness, tantrums, anxiety and depression**. They are found in *dairy foods, fish, green leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds, grains (e.g. quinoa and amaranth) and in the micro-algae supplements (wild blue-green algae, spirulina and chlorella)*.

Some foods (e.g. fizzy drinks, highly processed foods, chocolate, sweets) can have bad effects on blood sugar levels, leading to **mood swings** (highs and lows). Starchy foods that do not have this effect include *oats, beans, lentils, yam, millet, sweet potato, basmati or brown rice, pasta and certain fruits (e.g. bananas, apples, pineapple)*. High consumption of caffeine (e.g. in coffee and stimulant drinks) can create physical feelings that are indistinguishable from **anxiety**.

Smokers need more vitamin C (e.g. need to eat more *fruit*).

¹ See Amanda Geary’s excellent book ‘The Food and Mood Handbook’ for more information on this and practical help regarding various issues to do with food, nutrition and psychological well-being.

Multi-vitamins with iron can help, but the best way to get these (and other essential nutrients) is through food, especially fresh food.

Medication

The adverse effects of **psychiatric medication** can affect people's diet and consequently their physical and mental health. These include nausea, constipation, diarrhoea, chewing and swallowing problems, weight change, taste changes, altered thirst, hyper-salivation, movement problems, tiredness, and indifference to well-being. There are things that might help, and NHS **Dieticians** may be good people to consult.

For example, disturbances in **taste** might be helped by:

- Allowing food to cool a little; by eating cold rather than hot meat
- Avoiding saccharine if you have bitter taste
- Gargling lemon juice to reduce metallic tastes
- Eating sharper fruits (e.g. *grapefruit, gooseberry*) and adding spice to desserts to reduce sweetness
- Avoiding processed foods to reduce saltiness
- Drinking more water (chilled water tastes more pleasant)

Problems with a **dry mouth** might be helped by:

- Avoiding dry foods such as biscuits and toast. Adding sauces or gravy
- Frequently sipping drinks (not coffee or high sugar ones; preferably plain water)
- Stimulating saliva e.g. eating pineapple chunks, grapefruit segments
- Good dental care

Loss of appetite due to **nausea** might be helped by:

- Preparing foods to be eaten later
- Avoiding lingering smells – try convenience or cold foods
- Eating dry food, especially in the morning, and avoiding drinks with meals
- Ginger flavoured food
- Savoury rather than sweet foods. Avoiding fatty foods
- Not lying down soon after eating

Reducing your dose, changing your drug or coming off **psychiatric medication** altogether should be considered if the adverse effects of taking the drug outweigh the benefits.

The way forward

Countries where there are large differences in income and wealth between the wealthy and the poor members of that society have significantly greater levels of physical and mental health problems than countries where wealth and income are more evenly distributed. We need to work together to create such a society, for the benefit of all.

Poor mental and physical health are inter-linked. Living in toxic social conditions – where people experience the worst effects of poverty, abuse and discrimination, and have few people being kind or loving to them, leads to low self esteem and a sense of hopelessness about the future, which can lead to people not valuing themselves and finding it difficult (both practically and psychologically) to buy and cook food that would lead to better physical and consequently mental health.

We are bombarded by advertising to drink strong coffee (which causes **sleep problems** and **anxiety** feelings) and eat high carbohydrate and high sugar foods that often unnecessarily contain high levels of chemicals (e.g. processed fast food, sweets, fizzy drinks, food with high concentrations of colouring, preservatives and ‘E’ numbers). Such foods provide quick ‘**highs**’ but not lasting well being. These foods and chemicals affect all of us, although the effects on young children are often remarkable, and can be a factor in causing behaviours that lead to children being diagnosed as hyperactive or having Attention Deficit Disorder. Children’s T.V. is accompanied by adverts promoting unhealthy foods and drinks, making it harder for parents to establish healthy eating routines for their children.

We are made to feel miserable that our bodies do not mirror the ‘ideal’ bodies we see in films, on television and in magazines (bodies often artificially altered by computer imaging to make them look even slimmer). Being larger than a super model does not imply poor physical health – Sumo wrestlers are extremely fit. The misery we are made to feel is designed to make us seek help in magazines advertising diets that don’t work and beauty products and health gimmicks that earn cosmetic companies billions of pounds but do nothing to provide long-lasting relief of our misery.

Solidarity against body-fascism, sufficient money for all people to afford decent food, meaningful things for people to do in the day, a cultivation of a society where friends and family encourage each other rather than take out their frustrations on each other, reduced oppression from powerful media, government and corporate institutions, less emphasis on selling products and more on improving people’s psychological and physical well-being are needed alongside increased awareness of how easy it is to be badly affected by poor nutrition.

Despite headline stories designed to sell newspapers rather than inform people, dietary advice has remained fairly constant over the past few decades, concentrating on people **reducing their fat, sugar, salt and alcohol intake; eating five portions of fresh fruit and raw or lightly cooked vegetables per day; eating high fibre foods; oily fish, and above all else having a varied diet.** It may seem difficult to change long-established eating habits but a few basic changes can make a rapid difference. For example, drinking 2-3 litres of water a day is the quickest and cheapest form of detoxification. Substituting boiled rice or other wholegrains for chips, and steaming instead of frying fish and meat reduces the intake of fats. Replacing sweets and puddings by fresh fruit, seeds (e.g. sesame, sunflower and pumpkin) and nuts (especially brazil nuts) significantly cuts down sugar and adds vitamins and minerals.

Dieticians can help people with many of these things. Your G.P. will refer you. Changes in diet can lead to significant improvements in people’s physical and psychological well-being:

“I have tried all sorts of psychiatric treatments and psychological interventions over the past 20 years but changing what I eat has had the biggest effect on my mental health.”
Jan Wallcraft

This leaflet has been written by Dr Guy Holmes, Clinical Psychologist, Shropshire’s Psychology Consultancy Service and Jan Wallcraft, psychiatric survivor, researcher and author.