

food and mood:

how what you *eat*
affects how you *feel*

The relationship between the foods we eat and our physical health is well known, but the link between our diet and our mental health can often be overlooked. Here we explore what we know about the role nutrition can play in our mental health, and how we can use this information to support our day-to-day mood and wellbeing.

topping up on nutrients

Aim for an overall balanced diet including:

- Nutrients which are important for supporting energy levels and brain health (see table on next page for more information)
- Protein-rich foods (such as lean meat, eggs and beans) for essential amino acids to support the synthesis of the neurotransmitters (messenger chemicals) involved in regulating mood
- Carbohydrates for energy, including fibre-rich choices (such as wholegrain versions of bread and pasta) for a healthy gut
- Moderate amounts of healthy fats (such as olive and rapeseed oils, nuts and seeds, and oily fish) which are needed for good brain health

Many vitamins and minerals play a role in helping regulate our mood and cognitive functioning, so having a varied, balanced diet helps ensure we're getting plenty in our diet and avoiding deficiencies.



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specific nutrients which play a role in cognition and mood include:



Nutrient	Role	Sources
B vitamins particularly B1 (thiamin), B3 (niacin), folate and B12	Key role in cognitive functioning. Deficiency can lead to tiredness and an increased chance of feeling depressed or irritable.	A varied diet, including eggs, green leafy veg, wholegrain bread, fortified cereals, meat and dairy.
<i>B12 can only be found naturally in animal products such as meat and milk, or fortified products, so those following a vegan diet may need to support their intake with a supplement.</i>		
Iron	Essential for making red blood cells which carry oxygen around the body. Deficiency can leave us feeling tired, weak and lethargic, which can impact mood.	Meat, beans and pulses, nuts, brown rice, dried apricots, dark green leafy veg such as curly kale, and fortified cereals.
<i>While iron isn't as well absorbed from plant sources, enjoying them alongside foods containing vitamin C, such as red peppers or strawberries, helps to increase how much iron is absorbed. The tannins in tea and coffee can decrease iron absorption, so it's recommended to avoid drinking them with meals and to be mindful of how frequently these drinks are chosen over the day.</i>		
Selenium	Supports the immune system and thyroid function. Deficiency has been linked to an increased risk of experiencing negative moods, including depression.	Brazil nuts, seeds, meat and fish.
Omega 3 fatty acids	Essential for brain health. Studies have shown including sufficient amounts in the diet can support the maintenance of memory and may prevent depression.	Oily fish such as salmon, sardines, and mackerel are great sources. Plant-based sources include walnuts, linseed/flaxseed, chia seeds and rapeseed oil.



eating regularly

Our brain requires a lot of energy to focus well and its preferred source of fuel is glucose. Including carbohydrates in our diet throughout the day provides this important glucose, and so helps to keep our brain power, and our mood, in better shape.

Choose slow-release carbohydrates more often as they release glucose into the bloodstream at a more gradual rate, such as oats, wholegrain cereals and bread, rice, pasta and couscous (preferably higher-fibre wholegrain options as fibre helps to slow glucose release), beans and pulses. Eating regularly helps to maintain steady blood sugar levels throughout the day and avoid those dips which can leave us feeling tired, irritable and low. Base meals and snacks on these slower-release carbohydrates and enjoy sugary treats occasionally, at a time when they can really be savoured, rather than relying on them for a quick energy boost which doesn't last.

looking after your 'second brain'

A growing body of research has investigated the influence of the gut on many aspects of our wellbeing, particularly our mental health. There's a whole world of 'good' bacteria and neurotransmitters living in our digestive tract. The gut has even been referred to as a 'second brain' due to evidence showing that bacteria in the gut can communicate with the brain via the 'Gut-Brain axis'. An estimated 90% of the neurotransmitter serotonin is produced in the gut. Serotonin plays a pivotal role in mood regulation and is linked to feelings of happiness.

Enjoying a variety of nutrient-rich foods helps to maintain good gut health and feeds those 'good' bacteria so

they can thrive. In particular, including plenty of different sources of fibre in the diet has been associated with a healthy balance of gut bacteria. Choosing wholegrain varieties of pasta, bread and rice, leaving the skin on veg such as potatoes, enjoying high-fibre cereals such as bran and oats, and packing your meals with plenty of fruit and veg all helps to support a healthy fibre intake.

If you're increasing your fibre intake, do so gradually and ensure you're drinking plenty of fluids too, which helps with easing any unpleasant side effects.

drinking plenty

Keeping well hydrated is essential for maintaining concentration and can help to prevent headaches and feelings of tiredness and irritability which can result from being dehydrated. Aim for around 1.5-2 litres of fluid per day, which is around 6-8 glasses.

alcohol & mood

All fluid counts towards the 6-8 glasses, apart from alcohol due to its dehydrating effect (unfortunately!). Sometimes we can turn to alcohol to help us to destress or to alleviate feelings of sadness or anger. Alcohol acts as a sedative and can temporarily reduce feelings of anxiety or low mood. However, as the body processes alcohol, the sedative effects begin to wear off, and in fact an increase in feelings of anxiety can develop. This effect can be felt most strongly by those who have existing difficulties with anxiety or low mood.

Having a couple of drinks every now and then isn't likely to cause harm but drinking in excess may increase your chances of experiencing anxiety and low mood. Reflect on how you feel during and after drinking, and if you'd like more information or support, visit [drinkaware.co.uk](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk) for useful resources.

caffeine & mood

Found in tea, coffee, colas and energy drinks, caffeine is a stimulant and can perk up our energy levels. Some people find it triggers symptoms of anxiety or depression though, and can disrupt sleep, so it's important to be mindful of your consumption. Swapping to decaf versions of tea and coffee or choosing naturally caffeine-free drinks such as herbal and fruity teas can help to reduce caffeine intake while keeping you hydrated.

eating socially

Eating with others can increase time for conversation and social interaction and can provide an opportunity to discuss anxieties and reflect on your day. Research shows that those who eat with others regularly report feeling more engaged in their community and are less likely to report feelings of loneliness. Some people find it enjoyable to cook and share food with others, as an opportunity to reap the social benefits while tucking into their favourite foods and trying new things.



Understanding your relationship with food

Our food choices can be influenced by our emotions, and vice versa, what we eat can affect how we feel. For instance, if we're tired or have a bad day, we may be steered towards those foods we find comforting or easily accessible. It's not uncommon for these foods to be high in calories, sugar and fat. Foods are neither good or bad – they all have a place and food can be so much more than just nutrition – but we might find ourselves labelling these foods as 'bad' and experiencing feelings of guilt or regret if we feel we've eaten 'too much' of them. This can contribute to negative emotions and low mood.

Through understanding your emotions and how they link with what you eat, you may be able to recognise a similar situation in the future, which can help you feel better prepared for managing these instances. Some people find keeping a food and mood diary can be helpful for identifying patterns in how what they eat impacts on how they feel, either positively or negatively.

You could also try creating a list of non-food treats for days when you're feeling run down, tired or irritable, such as having a bath or doing a fun activity with friends.

Being compassionate to yourself can be beneficial too. It's completely normal to turn to food when we're feeling low. Rather than beating yourself up if you feel you've overindulged and telling yourself you've done something 'wrong', try out some self-kindness, treating yourself as you would a friend, in a way that's encouraging, supportive and without blame. Learning to identify why you may have turned to food in response to a particular situation can be a useful starting point, and you can then consider whether other non-food activities would have been just as rewarding. Sometimes though only cake will do! Let yourself be comfortable with this and not feel guilty. Being less self-critical can be so beneficial and research suggests being part of a group can make a real difference. One study shows that since attending weekly group support sessions, Slimming World members have typically learned to reduce how critical they are of themselves when things go wrong and have instead become more self-reassuring, leading to healthier behaviours after a lapse.

other things to consider...

Sleep

It can be too easy to neglect how much sleep we get, but it has a huge impact on our mood and food choices. Our **Sleep factsheet** has lots of information and tips on this essential part of our wellbeing.

Activity

Being active releases endorphins leaving you with a post-exercise 'buzz'. It can help improve self-image and confidence and is a great way to connect socially – all brilliant support for your mood. A wealth of research shows the benefits of exercise for improving mood and energy levels in those with depression, and it's often recommended alongside other treatments. It can also help alleviate some of the stress and tension associated with anxiety and give a sense of purpose and achievement. Doing activity that you enjoy and really want to continue with is important so try different things until you find something you like. For top tips on fitting activity into your routine, check out the **Top Tips Caring for You** resource.

For a variety of delicious, healthy recipes, visit slimmingworld.co.uk.

You may also be interested in further Caring for You features on **preparing healthy food for work**, **healthy eating**, and **quick and healthy microwavable meals**.



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