Boost Your Energy and Mood By Eating Well

by LANA BARHUM

Fighting Depression With Good Nutrition

I have struggled with depression most of my adult life, most recently with the death of my mother. During the toughest days, I tried everything — therapy, anti-depressants, and trying hard to be happy. But most days, I felt I didn't have anything left in me to keep going or lift my mood. And when I felt this way, my diet suffered.

If you are depressed and not making healthy nutrition choices, you will not get the energy and the nutrients your brain needs to feel emotionally better.

A 2009 study, reported in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, suggests that people who eat a lot of processed and junk foods up their chances of depression by as much as 58%. But yet so often, these are the foods we reach for when we are depressed.

Mental Health and Nutrition

Comfort foods, like pasta, fried and junk foods, and sweets, are foods we turn to when we are feeling emotionally drained or depressed. An emotional rise and a downhill plunge are the way these foods raise and lower blood sugar, and once that happens, your mood plummets too.

Researchers in Australia found people who were eating a balanced diet of fruits and vegetables, meats, fish and whole grains had a lowered risk for becoming depressed, compared to those who were eating an unhealthy diet, which includes processed and fried foods.

A 2011 study out of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and the University of Granada in Spain found eating fast food and baked goods are linked to a greater risk of depression — as much as 51%.

There are good foods that bring real and last lasting comfort when are struggling with depression or on the verge of it. By eating foods containing a balance of nutrients, you can strengthen your mind and body in mood-boosting ways.

Eat For Your Mental Health

Making certain changes to your diet and eating certain foods may help you to manage depression and promote better moods. Here are some ways to help you fight depression symptoms and improve your mental health.

Increase Your Omega-3 Fats

Increased intake of omega-3s helps to protect against depression, according to a 2007 research study.

The Norwegian study, of around 22,000 study participants, found people who had a diet rich in omega-3 fatty

acids, and who were taking cod liver oil, was about 30% less likely to have depression symptoms. And the longer the participants took the cod liver oil, the further their risk was decreased.

Another study — this one out of Ireland — finds that omega-3 fatty acids may help improve symptoms of depressed mood in people already suffering from depression. Some of the study participants, who were at risk for hurting themselves, were given omega-3 acid supplements for 12 weeks, in addition to psychiatric care.

At the end of the 12-week period, the patients who had received the omega-3 supplements had significantly improved compared to the patients who had taken a placebo. They showed improvements in scores for depression, suicide risk, and management of daily stress.

There have been numerous other studies suggesting depressed people using antidepressants don't show improvements until they are supplementing with omega-3 fatty acids.

Foods high in omega-3s include salmon, sardines, walnuts, and flaxseed. If you do not like fish or are unable to consume omega-3 containing foods, talk to your doctor about an omega-3 supplement.

Get More Vitamin B

Vitamin B vitamins play an important part in regulating mood. In fact, there have been studies showing people with low levels of vitamin B12, B-6 or folate are also depressed.

Low levels of vitamin B are a result of poor eating habits and/or not being able to absorb vitamins from food sources. Older adults, vegetarians and people with digestion disorders may have trouble getting enough B vitamins, especially B-12.

You can get more B vitamins in your diet by eating a healthy diet that includes animal products, such as fish, lean meats, eggs, and milk. Fortified cereals also contain B-12 and other B vitamins.

If you do not eat meat or dairy products, talk to your doctor about alternative sources, including supplements, to help you get more vitamin B in your diet.

Next page: the best foods for depression to include in your diet.

Eat For Your Mental Health

Get More Amino Acids

The targeted use of amino acid supplements has helped some people with feelings of anxiety, stress, and depression. Research has shown that amino acids, the important building blocks of life (responsible for all human biological processes), can help balance out brain chemistry, increase brain function and promote mental health.

Our bodies produce about 12 amino acids; the remaining eight, called essential amino acids, can be found in the foods we eat. Essential amino acids are found in protein sources, such as meats, eggs, dairy, beans, peas, and grains.

Balance Out Blood Sugar

When you are depressed, you may find yourself reaching for sugary and carb-heavy foods. While the spike in blood sugar helps for a short period, it won't be long before you crash and find yourself feeling sad and irritable once more.

Best Foods for Depression Management

Processed foods high in sugar can cause inflammation within the body and brain. These foods are typically also high in salt, which can increase blood pressure — a major factor in strokes and heart attacks among other things. Sugar and salt aren't all bad, as small amounts are needed in the body, but we tend to go overboard.

The good news is that with some small dietary changes, your body should feel better which should improve your state of mind and wellbeing. Consider including these foods for depression in your diet:

- **Dark leafy greens.** Leafy greens such as kale, spinach, and Swiss chard are high in powerful immune-boosting nutrients and are loaded with vitamins. These power foods help to reduce inflammation in the brain that has been linked to severe depression. They may seem intimidating at first, but a spinach salad or a power-packed green smoothie is a great way to incorporate these leafy vegetables into your diet without feeling overwhelmed.
- **Nuts and seeds.** Rich in omega-3 fatty acids, nuts and seeds naturally support brain function, leading to fewer depression symptoms. Walnuts and cashews are great snacks and can be incorporated into salads and stir-frys. Seeds like sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, and chia seeds can be a great addition to trail mix, homemade granola, and granola bars, or even added to your morning oatmeal.

- **Mushrooms.** Mushrooms act in a similar way to insulin, helping to lower blood sugar and stabilize your mood. Mushrooms are so diverse that they can be added into almost any meal, including salads, pasta dishes, stir-frys, and so many others.
- **Beans and legumes.** Beans are full of protein and, much like mushrooms, help to level out blood sugar levels. They also take longer to digest so they are a great way to keep you full for longer and can help to fight the cravings for the easily accessible processed foods.
- **Avocados.** These fruits have become widely popular because of their high content of folate, betacarotene and plenty of other vitamins. They are considered a fat, but they can make a great addition to any sandwich, salad or pasta dish.
- **Fatty fish and lean proteins.** Salmon is a great example of a fatty fish high in omega-3 fatty acids that encourage a healthy brain to help combat depression. Lean proteins are essential to every diet and can help you to feel full longer and ward off any cravings for sugar and processed foods that make you feel worse.
- **Antioxidants.** Foods like berries, broccoli, carrots, nuts and seeds, pumpkin and sweet potatoes are all full of vitamins and nutrients that help to combat the effects of damaging molecules. Foods that promote a healthy brain will naturally promote increased mental health.
- **Vitamins and supplements.** If a change in diet and eating habits seems daunting or overwhelming, you may want to start smaller with something like a daily vitamin or supplements to increase your intake of important nutrients. Some of the more popular options are vitamin D and B, fish oil, and magnesium. Vitamins and herbal supplements for depression should still be considered as medications and should be discussed with your doctor before taking them to ensure that they won't interfere with any other medications or conditions.