**The science behind food and mood**

We’ve all been there: feeling down or stressed after a long day so we reach for a quick pick-me-up in the form of ‘junk’ food. Instead of feeling better though, these unhealthy foods such as soft drinks and highly processed and refined foods end up having the opposite effect – giving us an immediate sugar-fuelled dopamine rush followed by a severe drop which often affects our mood.

For those managing existing mental health issues, nutrition is crucial. A 2017 study looked at dietary factors as an intervention to treat depression. This research showed that when mental health patients were given the right nutrition information – plus assistance to improve their diets – they experienced fewer and less severe depressive episodes.

Holistic mind/body approaches to promoting positive mental health have increased in popularity in recent years, with more and more studies documenting the links between a healthy diet, exercise, sleep, mindfulness and mental wellbeing.

Vitality dietician Terry Harris emphasises that as with other organs in our body, the brain requires nutrient dense foods to function optimally.

“We’re seeing more and more how nutritional factors are intertwined with human cognition, behaviour and emotion. There is a growing body of evidence showing that nutrition may play an important role in preventing and managing mental health issues,” she says, adding, “this is particularly apparent in preventing and managing depression.”

**Food for thought**

People who incorporate a wide range of healthy food in their diet and actively limit their intake of sugary drinks and unhealthy foods high in added sugar (sweets, chocolates, cake, biscuits), refined cereals, processed meat and highly processed or fast food tend to have an overall happier outlook on life and fewer mood changes. Adopting a diet of healthy food means following general nutrition guidelines plus staying hydrated as well as minimising alcohol and caffeine intake.

All this plays a role in regulating your mood and levels of anxiety. “Mental health can be an overwhelming challenge for people, so to have control in the nutrition space at least can make things feel more manageable,” says Harris.

“Plus,” she adds, “Don’t think you have to do everything at once. At Vitality we believe in small steps for big changes. Try one nutrition tip a week to see how best to fit these new healthy behaviours into your life.”

**Top tips to improve your emotional wellbeing:**

1. **Eat vegetables and fruit every day.**

These contain the vitamins, minerals and fibre your brain and body need to function well.

Incorporate more vegetables into every meal, serve fresh fruit after meals to satisfy sweet cravings instead of sugary desserts and snack on fruit in between meals instead of sugary, salty options.

1. **Pick healthy protein and fats.**

Lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs as well as legumes (beans, lentils and chickpeas) assist to regulate your thoughts, emotions and mood. Also add nuts and seeds, sugar-free nut butters and olive oil to your grocery shopping list.

1. **Prioritise wholegrains and fibre-rich starchy foods.**

Brown rice, wholewheat bread, wholewheat pasta and wholewheat couscous, quinoa, oats, bulgur wheat and popcorn provide your body with essential nutrients.

1. **Keep hydrated.**

Even low levels of dehydration can affect your mood, concentration and energy levels. The heathiest option is water but unsweetened herbal tea such as chamomile also counts towards this intake. Try infusing plain water with lemon or slices of fresh fruit or cucumber and mint or choose unflavoured sparkling water for something different.

1. **Eat with others.**

When possible, share mealtimes with other people. There are many psychological and social benefits of eating meals with others, for example, helping us feel connected to others plus helping us to eat more slowly in between conversation.

Eating healthily is a cornerstone of the Vitality program and a great way to improve your mental health. Don’t forget to prioritise exercise, spend time outdoors and practise good sleep hygiene to get the most benefit when it comes to your mental wellbeing.

Looking for food-spiration?