

HEALTHY MINDS

A Weekly Column All About Mental Wellness
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Nutrition and Mental Wellness



We have all heard the old cliché, “you are what you eat”. This holds true not only for your physical but for your mental health as well. Separating the concepts of physical and mental are just a convenient way that we look at ourselves, but they are really interrelated and almost inseparable.

How does food affect the brain? When your body is at rest your brain uses 20 to 30% of your energy intake just to keep up its normal function. If you are hungry you may feel restless and easily irritated, whereas you may tend to feel more calm and satisfied if you just ate. Having a cup of coffee and a snack can make you more productive. If you are not eating enough you can become moody or indifferent. The brain needs a lot of energy food (proteins, carbohydrates, and fats) and the right kind of other nutrients – vitamins and minerals - to function at its best. A lack (or an excess) of certain vitamins or minerals can negatively affect your memory and your ability to think clearly and solve the daily problems and chores of life.

Just by skipping breakfast a person lowers his capacity for solving problems, and feels less motivated. If the person is generally malnourished then the effects are even more pronounced, and a person can often feel sad, apathetic, sad, or even hopeless.

Many fast foods and snack foods are lacking in proper nutrition and can contribute to nutritional deficiencies, as can some fad diets. Let’s look at the different food groups briefly and make a few comments.

Carbohydrates include the starches that also contain dietary fiber – like bread, rice, cereal, starchy vegetables (like potatoes and beans), cereals and other grain products, and other fruits and vegetables. There are natural occurring sugars in many of these products (and in milk). Then there are the refined sugars which includes all sweet cakes, cookies, candies, and soda pop, and many other so-called fruit drinks that are loaded with sugar. Carbohydrates tend to make you drowsy; think of how you feel after a big meal. Some scientists believe that too much sugar contributes to hyperactivity in children. They may seem to get a huge burst of energy that soon plays out as the sugar is quickly digested, and then the child becomes lethargic. Most sugary foods are filled with empty calories that lack most other nutrients. Observant parents can often see how certain foods influence their children’s thinking and behavior.

Proteins are the building blocks of muscle and tissue, and come from eating the muscle tissues of animals (meat, poultry, and fish), or from eggs, dairy products, or a combination of nuts and grains that form whole proteins only when combined together (like pinto beans and cornbread, peanut butter and wheat bread, or rice and beans).

Proteins are made up of amino acids, and they are vital in proper brain and nerve function. One amino acid, called tryptophan, is vital to the body to make a nerve transmitter called serotonin. If the level falls too low, a person can become moody or even aggressive.

Fats are another essential part of our diet and are found in fatty meats, plant oils, and dairy products like cream, butter, and cheese. If we reduce our fat and cholesterol intake too much we can lower our brain serotonin level, which you recall, can make us moody, angry and aggressive. Of course too much fat and cholesterol in the diet can lead to clogging of the arteries, decreasing blood flow to the brain, and even causing a stroke.

A fish oil called omega-3 fatty acid is found in many fish and is believed by many researches to reduce stress and even help reduce the affect of bipolar disorder (what we used to called manic-depressive disorder).

Alcohol is technically a food, and can give you energy but not vitamins or minerals; furthermore, it can interrupt normal sleep patterns, and affect your mood. It can also prevent your body from absorbing needed nutrients thus further affecting mental functioning.

Vitamins have a profound affect on mental health. Let's look at the most important ones.

Thiamin is a B-vitamin found in pork, beans, nuts and enriched grains and is used by the body to make several nerve transmitters. Alcohol can interfere with this process, causing unsteadiness, memory loss, abnormal eye movements and confusion.

Folic acid, another B-vitamin found in liver, wheat, broccoli, asparagus, yeast, and some nuts and beans is essential to the growing fetus. A lack can cause *spina bifida*. In adults a lack can lower serotonin production causing depression, and can increase the risk of stroke.

Vitamin B-12, found only in animal products, is essential to a healthy nervous system. A lack can impair brain function, cause irreparable damage to the nerves and brain, and dementia.

Niacin, another B-vitamin, is found in wheat brain, meat, fish, asparagus, and peanuts. A lack can cause insomnia, memory loss, headaches, emotional instability, and irritability.

Vitamin B-6 (pyridoxine) is found in many foods and a deficiency is rare, but can be caused, ironically, by certain antidepressant drugs, causing nervousness, tiredness, insomnia, irritability, depression, and dizziness. Too much B-6, caused by an excess of supplements, can cause nerve damage.

Vitamin E is usually available in green leafy vegetables and vegetable oil, and may help slow the development of Parkinson's disease.

Vitamin A is found in meat, fish, eggs, green leafy vegetables and orange colored vegetables. In excess it can cause fatigue, headache, appetite loss, and irritability; a lack can cause severe headaches.

Finally, let us mention the minerals most important to mental wellness. Anemia, which is caused by a lack of iron in the diet, can cause fatigue and impaired brain functioning. Deficiency during the first two years of a child's life can cause permanent brain damage.

Magnesium, found in green leafy vegetables, bananas, nuts, seeds, and whole grains, helps with nerve transmission. A lack can cause nervousness, twitching of the muscles, and general unsteadiness when somewhat lacking; when severely lacking it can cause delirium and apathy.

Manganese, found in whole grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables and is rarely deficient, but when it is can cause brain abnormalities; an excess gives symptoms like Parkinson's disease.

A lack of copper, found in liver, nuts and seeds, whole grains, cereals, and seafood, impairs brain functioning, as can a lack of zinc, which can also cause apathy, irritability, fatigue, and jitteriness. Zinc is found in seafood, red meats, eggs, dairy products, and vegetables.

Finally, selenium in too great a quantity can cause fatigue and irritability. The amount in grains and seeds depends on the selenium content of the soil in which it is grown.

It is amazing that these foods and nutrients can affect the health of our minds as well as our bodies. The requirements of some of these substances are minute, yet their effect on our well-being is tremendous. It is essential then that we try to eat balanced meals with whole grains, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, while avoiding junk food full of calories and devoid of much of our required nutrients. Those of us who are parents have to teach our children well by introducing healthy foods into our daily meals, and teaching by example and availability.

TIP OF THE WEEK: MSG and Aspartame are food additives that are nerve stimulants that can be harmful to our mental well-being and are unnatural products that do not belong in the food we eat.

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