

Designing a Mood Food Diet

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There may be some truth to the adage “You are what you eat.” Are you moody or depressed, in need of revitalization and energy, or notice your behavior and mood changes from day to day? Do you have those days that are perfect and you feel on top of the world whereas other days you feel like you have hit rock bottom? Your mood and energy levels may be related to your diet.

What you eat affects your mental functioning. By choosing certain foods, you may be better able to balance your emotional and mental health. Putting the right fuel into your body may affect your performance and make the difference between a happy day and a grumpy day.

There is no doubt that food can make us feel good. Food has the ability to alter the production or release of neurotransmitters. This mood-food relationship is explained by neurotransmitters, which are chemical messengers transmitting our thoughts and actions to the brain. The food we eat affects the neurotransmitters, thus changing our moods. These messengers within our bodies also tell us when we are full, if a food is too hot, or if it doesn't taste good. The theory is that the nutrients in foods are precursors to the neurotransmitters, and they decide how much of the neurotransmitter is produced. It is complicated, though, because foods are made of many nutrients that interact together.

The mood-food connection is a combination of physiological and psychological interactions. For instance, it may be that a food is comforting and reminds us of family meals while growing up, a pleasurable association with childhood; it may be the temperature of the “comfort” food - like warm hot chocolate - that is the comforting element, helping you to relax or fall asleep.

How to design a mood food diet:

- The first step in designing a mood food diet is to remember that every person is different, as is every day.
- Look at what foods you like to eat and what comprises your normal diet.
- What is the status of your psychological and emotional health?
- Access what personality trait you would like to modify.
- Manipulate what foods will help to correct this imbalance.

In order to adjust the foods you eat to control your moods, you need to understand a few basic principles. Certain foods act like a physiological “switch” due to the nutrients in the food. It is the combination of the protein, carbohydrate and fat (macronutrients) content, and the vitamins and minerals (micronutrients) that affect your mood. Your mood can be related to a deficit of nutrients; it may be as simple as an inadequate, poorly balanced diet, or it could be just one nutrient triggering a mood reaction. Some foods can enhance positive moods like water, fiber-rich foods, oil-rich fish, fruits and vegetables, while other foods can increase negative moods such as foods high in caffeine, alcohol or sugar.

Can chocolate put you in the mood?

Chocolate may help to get rid of depressed feelings because it is a psychoactive food containing more than 300 compounds that can affect moods. Throughout history, chocolate has been used for many health-inducing purposes. The Aztecs made a frothy, chocolate beverage that was believed to be a stimulant and impart vitality and wisdom. Chocolate has even been used as an aphrodisiac. Casanova reportedly ate chocolate before each of his sexual escapades, and a study done in the mid-1990s by Debra Waterhouse, RD, found more than 50% of the women surveyed preferred chocolate to sex.*



***EDITOR'S NOTE:** We are not sure exactly what this study implies but perhaps for a more amorous evening, a chocolate Martini might be in order.

Which nutrients and common foods affect our moods?

Carbohydrates

A key chemical in food tied to your mood is serotonin. Higher levels of serotonin influence your concentration, as it is relaxing and calming and helps keep you from being depressed. Carbohydrates help to raise the levels of serotonin in the body. A decrease in serotonin levels may increase the appetite and cause carbohydrate cravings. Stress buster foods, which are high in carbohydrates, are whole grains, fruit, high fiber cereals, rice and potatoes.

Protein

Protein increases alertness and helps give you more energy. Protein has an amino acid called tyrosine, which increases dopamine, norepinephrine and epinephrine levels. Norepinephrine and dopamine are responsible for alertness and excitement. Low levels of norepinephrine and dopamine may make one feel anxious. The calming effect from carbohydrates and the energizing effect from protein provide a good balance. To pep yourself up, try eating eggs, low fat cheese, milk, tofu, lean meats, fish, legumes, turkey, and/or lean beef. High protein foods such as milk and chicken, along with bananas and green leafy vegetables also trigger the release of endorphins that increase the release of dopamine.

Vitamins and Minerals

Some vitamins and minerals such as folic acid and selenium are involved in mood related disorders. A lack of folic acid in the diet may be linked to depression. Oranges, turkey, asparagus, beets, soybeans and green leafy vegetables like spinach are good sources of folic acid. Too little selenium in the diet can make you grouchy, anxious and depressed. Good sources of selenium include whole grains, tomatoes, eggs, broccoli, tuna, and sunflower seeds.

Caffeine

When it comes to caffeine, less is more; it is best to have caffeine in moderation. A small amount may keep you alert and lift your mood, but it may be a downer during withdrawal. Too much may make you anxious or give you insomnia and headaches.



Salmon is a good source of Omega-3 fatty acids that can increase your endorphin levels and give you a natural high.

Fat

Eating too little fat can make you feel grouchy. Foods high in fat increase endorphins and make you happy. Endorphins are opiate-like chemicals that are the “feel good” neurotransmitters. To help keep your moods on an even keel, choose healthy fats such as monounsaturated fats found in olive oil, almonds and avocados. Additionally, the Omega-3 fatty acids found in seafood (especially salmon, lobster and shrimp), walnuts and olive oil may also help to reduce depression.

Changing your diet may enhance your mental health by improving mood swings, anxiety and depression. By controlling what you eat, you also control the messages passed on to your cells by the neurotransmitters, which control your body's functions such as your moods. So, if you are looking to take charge of your mental health via a positive change in your moods, try some mood elevating food tricks - you may end up being a happier person!