



Food and Your Mood

The connection between food and your mood is a two-way street. Food choices influence your mood, and mood influences your food choices. That's why it is so important to eat healthy. Nutrient-dense foods, such as 100% whole grains, lean protein, low-fat or fat-free dairy, fruits, and vegetables fuel your body and mind in ways that not only optimize your health and enhance your performance, but manage your stress and balance your mood as well.¹

Food Choices Affect Mood

Your brain plays a primary role in determining your mood.² Chemicals in your brain, known as neurotransmitters, send signals throughout your body that affect your stress level and ability to concentrate.² The three neurotransmitters that are most closely associated with mood are¹:

- Serotonin: promotes a sense of calm and lessens cravings
- Dopamine: sharpens attention and increases motivation
- Norepinephrine: heightens awareness and improves memory

Although additional research is needed, initial data suggests that deficiencies in these chemical messengers can lead to depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as well as difficulty sleeping, fatigue, irritability, and apathy.^{1,2}

Nutrients serve as the building blocks for serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine.³ Without proper nutrition, your brain cannot adequately communicate with the rest of your body, which may lead to changes in your mood.³ For example, processed or pre-packaged foods that are high in added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat can worsen your mood.⁴ These foods are often low in vitamins and minerals which inhibit neurotransmitters, disrupts sleep, and decrease blood flow to your brain.⁴ Check out the chart below to learn more about the effects that different nutrients have on your mood. Make sure to identify food sources that you can include in your daily intake to help maintain your overall health and well-being.

Nutrient	Impact on Mood	Source
Carbohydrate ¹	Produces a sense of calm	100% whole grain bread and cereal, potatoes, beans, peas, and corn
Protein ¹	Enhances alertness and boosts motivation	Lean meat, fish, poultry, low-fat or fat-free dairy, eggs, beans, and nuts
Omega-3 Fatty Acid ¹	Quiets cravings and induces calm	Salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring, flax seeds, and walnuts
Vitamin A ⁵	Impacts learning and memory development	Sweet potatoes, spinach, carrots, and fortified cereal
Vitamin B6 ⁶	Improves memory and concentration	Fortified cereal and soy products, potatoes, and chickpeas
Vitamin B12 ⁷	Regulates mood, controls emotions, and improves sleep	Clams, oysters, fish, lean meat, poultry, low-fat or fat-free dairy, and fortified cereal
Folate ⁸	Prevents depressed mood	Broccoli, spinach, collard, 100% whole grains, and fortified cereal
Vitamin C ⁹	Minimizes mood changes and boosts energy	Oranges, kiwi, strawberries, broccoli, tomatoes, and red and green peppers



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Nutrient	Impact on Mood	Source
Vitamin D ¹⁰	Eases depressive symptoms	Sunlight, fatty fish, eggs, fortified milk, juice, and cereal
Calcium ¹¹	Reduces anxiety and irritability and improves sleep	Milk, yogurt, cheese, kale, and fortified dairy alternatives (soy milk)
Iron ¹²	Fights fatigue, irritability, and mood swings	Lean beef, eggs, beans, and fortified cereal
Magnesium ¹³	Inhibits depression, psychosis, and muscle weakness	Oat bran, brown rice, and almonds
Potassium ¹⁴	Controls mood and prevents depression	Potatoes, bananas, yogurt, tuna, and soy

Mood Affects Food Choices

Do you eat because you're happy or sad? What about when you're bored or stressed? In addition to what you eat, you need to be aware of when and why you eat. Your mood can wreak havoc with your appetite and food cravings causing you to overeat or make poor food choices.¹⁵ Mindful eating is about paying attention to your hunger cues and your level of fullness. If your mood regularly affects your food choices, talk to a health care professional and check out the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (NMCPHC) Health Promotion and Wellness Department's (HPW) fact sheets on [Eating with Food in Mind](#) and the [Tracker to Identify Your Food Triggers](#) to help improve your eating habits.

The relationship between food and mood is complex. Proper nutrition can help control your stress level and stabilize your mood. However, healthy eating is not a substitute for medication prescribed to treat mental illness. If you think you have an illness or if you have been diagnosed with a condition, seek medical advice from your health care provider.

Resources

For additional information on the amount of each nutrient that your body needs to stay healthy, check out the following fact sheets:

- [Nutri-Facts: Nutrient Overview](#)
- [Nutri-Facts: Vitamins and Minerals](#)

References

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