



Depression: BHN Nutrition Fact Sheet

Understanding Depression: Being depressed can cause severe distress and poor functioning at work, school, and in the family. Episodes of depression are marked by a constant sense of despair, worthlessness, or hopelessness often coupled with loss of interest in usual activities, lack of energy, trouble concentrating, difficulty making decisions, changes in sleeping patterns, or significant change in weight. Severity and duration of episodes vary from person to person.

Risk Factors

Factors that seem to increase the risk of developing depression or triggering a depressive episode include, but are not limited to:

- Poor nutrition
- Genetics (Family history of depression)
- Chronic stress or poor sleep
- Conditions such as having a baby, serious diseases such as cancer, heart disease, HIV, alcohol/drug abuse, and the side effects of some medications

Depression and Nutrition

Depression can result in an increase or a decrease in appetite, over-eating for emotional comfort, or feeling too tired to plan and fix healthy meals and snacks. Both under- and over-eating can lead to poor nutritional status, which can affect mental health. Imbalances of carbohydrate, fat and protein are linked to depression. Vitamins and minerals are needed in order to produce neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters are chemicals found in your nerve cell that communicates with another nerve cell or with a muscle.

The neurotransmitters are of particular interest in preventing and treating depression. Specific diets, like a typical or traditional Western, Mediterranean, or Japanese diet may not necessarily alter risk for depression. However, eating patterns (as compared to studying individual nutrients) has shown that consuming a healthy, low-calorie, natural unprocessed foods, balanced diet is associated with a lower likelihood of depression.

Nutritional Assessment

A full nutritional assessment of your diet and supplements, laboratory tests, and evaluation of your medications will give you, your dietitian, and your doctor, information about whether these factors are contributing to depression and help you make a realistic plan for feeling better.

A Personal Nutrition Plan

A personal nutrition plan created by you and your dietitian will include consideration of:

Times of eating: Plan regular meals and snacks 3-5 hours apart each day.

Loss of appetite: Create a pleasant environment and make meals attractive by selecting foods that vary in texture, color, and flavor. Small, frequent meals or snacks, and a social setting may be helpful.

Increased appetite and food cravings: Take at least 20 minutes to finish your meals. Reach for low-calorie, high fiber foods such as whole grains, and opt for more water or other unsweetened beverages. Eat mindfully, take time to savor and enjoy the tastes, textures, and smells of your food.

Carbohydrates and blood sugar: Episodes of low blood sugar or high blood sugar may play a role in the development of depression. Carbohydrate-rich foods trigger brain chemicals, which increase feelings of well-being. Carbohydrates high in fiber are likely to provide a moderate but lasting effect on brain chemistry and mood, as compared to the immediate but temporary high that refined carbohydrates give. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains are good carbohydrate choices.

A Personal Nutrition Plan Continued

Variation in Proteins: Amino acids such as tryptophan, tyrosine, and glutamine produce the neurotransmitters that contribute to your mood. High protein sources include fish, poultry, eggs, beef, pork, beans, and dairy foods. Eat different proteins different days.

Balancing Fatty Acids: Fatty acids are important parts of the brain and nervous system. Deficiency in omega-3 fatty acids and below-normal levels of circulating cholesterol are believed to affect the development of depression. Include regular, moderate amounts of healthy fats daily such as avocado, nuts, and olive oil.

Vitamins and Minerals - enough, but not too many: Vitamins B1, B6, B12, C, D, and folic acid, and minerals (copper, iron, magnesium, zinc) are involved in the production of neurotransmitters that influence your mood. Other minerals involved in the possible development of depression include calcium, chromium, iodine, and selenium. The diets of those suffering from depression have been found deficient in Vitamins B1, B2, B6, B12, and folate, as well as minerals phosphorous, zinc, magnesium, and iron. Taking supplements to compensate caused some people to exceed Tolerable Upper Intake levels for some vitamins, and minerals.

Enough fluid: Include about 8 cups/day; water, milk, coffee, tea, juice, and sodas contribute to fluids.

Supplements: Use of supplements needs to be based on your personal food preferences and intake, food allergies, health conditions, laboratory test results, and income.

Activity: Regular physical activities and exercise improves mood, normalizes appetite, and will help keep your weight in a healthy range.

Medications: Antidepressants and other medications may affect appetite, thirst, digestion, absorption, excretion, weight, and nutrient needs. Discuss the medications you take and their side effects and nutrient interactions with your doctor, dietitian, and pharmacist. Many medications taken for depression can cause undesirable weight gain. Maintaining a healthy weight is important because obesity increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke, and some cancers.

A Sample Day

Approximately 1600 calories
For more calories use bigger servings

Breakfast

½ grapefruit
1 scrambled egg
2 slices whole wheat toast
2 teaspoons almond butter

Mid-Morning Snack

½ cup yogurt with ½ cup fruit

Lunch

2 corn tortillas
2 oz. cooked, chopped beef or chicken
1 oz. grated cheese
1/2 cup chopped lettuce and tomato
2 tablespoons salsa
Non-sweetened beverage

Afternoon Snack

2-3 cups popcorn
Unsweetened iced tea

Dinner

3-4 oz. Fish
1 cup brown rice; sautéed with olive oil, and 1 cup mixture of onions, mushrooms, green and red peppers
¾ cup broccoli with 2 tablespoons cheese sauce

Evening Snack

½-1 banana sliced with 1/3 cup orange juice and 2 tablespoon walnuts

Behavioral Health Nutrition

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