

Mood altering drugs.

Canada's Dieticians have declared March the month to focus on the relationship between nutrition and well-being. When we eat well, we feel well—emotionally.



A Counsellor's View.

I recently had an experience which reminded me of the significant role nutrition plays in mental and emotional well-being. A client had come to me with what appeared to be the start of depression (fatigue, lack of sleep, weakened ability to cope, diminished motivation).

I anticipated this would take several weeks of cognitive therapy. However, after our discussion on self-care, (sleep, nutrition, social support) she took the initiative and spoke to a pharmacist about nutrition. She was given high potency complex B vitamins which she started taking immediately.

Right away, she started to feel better, sleep better and became less stressed.

In her case, I suspect that combining vitamins and therapy accelerated the recovery. Vitamins, apparently had profound effect on this person's mood and emotions as she was able to complete counselling in half the time it normally takes. To be very clear, when it comes to mental health vitamins are often not the sole answer but certainly something to be considered as a useful adjunct.

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Nutrition Affects Both Physical and Mental Health.

The direct connection between nutrition and physical health is an easily understood concept. What is less easily accepted is the effects nutrition has on mental health.

In recent decades, medical studies have raised the suspicion

that poor diets represent a risk factor for depression.

American researchers Bodnar and Wisner published results in 2005 which show that rates of depression are higher among those whose omega-3 fatty acid intake is low.

They also noted that;

“deficiencies of folate, vitamin B12, iron, zinc and selenium tend to be more common among depressed than non-depressed persons.”

The good news is that these risk factors can easily be modified by changing dietary habits.

Omega-3 sources are walnuts, flax seeds and fish.

Folate is found in liver, yeast, legumes and dark green leafy vegetables.

Vitamin B12 is primarily available in animal sources like meat, milk, eggs, and fish but also in mushrooms, bamboo shoots and black tea.

The iron-rich foods are red meats, eggs, spinach and beans.

Zinc is in seafood, red meats, wheat germ, spinach and nuts.

Selenium is found in Brazil nuts, seafood, whole grains and seeds.

Understanding the Basics of Nutrition.

We can all improve our health by paying attention to what and how often we eat.

A healthy diet includes eating from all the food types: proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. The goal is to keep body weight stable in a normal range.

One important factor in achieving that is to be aware of the glycaemic index. It reflects the measure of the time it takes



for the body to break food down into glucose.

Foods which take longer to break down have a low glycaemic index (sometimes referred to as “good carbs” (like whole grain bread and brown rice) because they cause a slower change in blood sugar levels as opposed to those with a high number (like sugary foods and refined white grains) which get called “bad carbs.”).

Why do basic food types matter?

Proteins. Protein-rich foods are workhorses because they contribute to almost all of the body's functions, form muscle, enzymes and hormones.

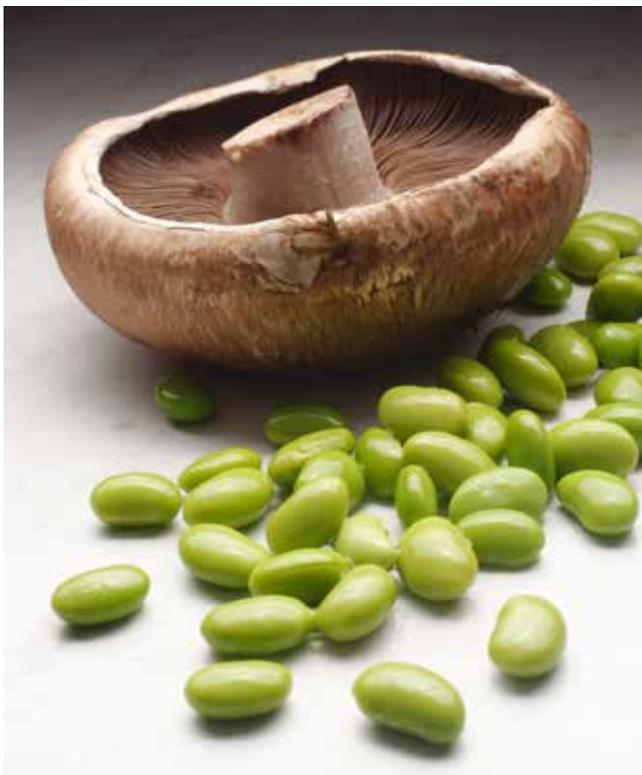
Chains of amino acids make up proteins. Foods which provide complete protein chains come from animal sources like milk, cheese, fish and meat. Incomplete protein sources like grains, legumes and nuts can form complete proteins if combined and eaten together.

Carbohydrates. Foods containing carbohydrates are essentially the really tasty ones! Chains of sugars (glucose or fructose) are what form carbohydrates. Long chains of them form starch. The body needs carbohydrates as fuel to make its muscles work and to power the brain. The message that the body needs fibre to digest food properly is well understood—but those fibre-

rich foods are the major sources of carbohydrates: grains, root vegetables, beans, rice and fruits.

Fats. We need fats in our diets for energy, insulation from cold, hormonal balance and mental stability. Watching intake of fats can manage cholesterol levels.

It is important to ingest more unsaturated (liquid) fats like oils, seeds, nuts and vegetables like avocados and olives which contribute to lower cholesterol levels (HDL) and to minimize intake of saturated fats (LDL) like butter, cheese and ice cream which raise cholesterol levels.



Foods Affect Moods.

Everyone has experienced the satisfaction of enjoying a tasty, satisfying meal and can recall the sense of well-being and elevated spirits that can bring. The opposite sensation occurs; a pervasive sense of uneasiness or sadness when we go for long periods without ingesting food. Alertness drops and some report sensations of physical weakness and even a sense of becoming emotionally overwhelmed.

The chemical imbalances caused by missing meals can result in feeling anxious or agitated to the point where it interferes with social interaction or sleep. A non-pharmaceutical solution is to consume some calming foods



Those known to calm people are whole grains, seaweed, blueberries, acai berries, almonds and chocolate. It is also useful to drink more water because dehydration can result not only in fatigue but a heightened sense of anxiety.

The popular Dr. Oz show brings medical information to large audiences in simple demonstrations with practical suggestions for low-cost, easily accessible remedies. He recently featured a list of anti-anxiety foods which are known to boost the body's serotonin and deliver a sense of calm. They included kefir (fermented milk made from grains), fermented cabbage, oolong tea, pumpkin seeds, edamame and shrimp.

More attention gets focussed on serotonin over the winter months in Canada because

of its well-known effects that diminished levels can have on moods. The January 2014 issue of Chatelaine magazine featured an article by Dr. Natasha Turner "Six Natural Ways To Increase Your Serotonin Levels." She explains:

Though serotonin is typically recognized as a brain chemical, the majority of this neurotransmitter is produced in our digestive tract. Serotonin exerts powerful influence over mood, emotions, memory, cravings (especially for carbohydrates), self-esteem, pain tolerance, sleep habits, appetite, digestion and body-temperature regulation. It is often thought of as our "happy hormone," especially because its production increases when we're exposed to natural sunlight. And let's face it, after months of being stuck indoors,

most Canadians are battling low serotonin levels.

Production of serotonin is closely linked to the availability of vitamin B6 and the amino acid tryptophan. If our diet lacks sufficient protein and vitamins, we run a greater risk of serotonin deficiency. We may experience a dip in serotonin in relation to physiological causes, dieting, low protein intake, digestive disorders and also stress, since high levels of the stress hormone cortisol rob us of serotonin.

We all have the ability to make choices, and the evidence is stacking up that the food choices we make have a profound impact on how we feel about ourselves and how we cope with life. There are "modifiable risk factors" that we can control to avoid or reduce depression and anxiety. Some are as near as our grocery shelves.