

Take care of your psychological health through nutrition

Definition of mental health

For the World Health Organization (WHO), mental (psychological) health is “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” Good psychological health is therefore a key part of a person’s well-being and overall health.

According to recent studies, food and psychological health are connected. Poor nutrition seems to exacerbate mood disorders, including anxiety and depression. And, on the contrary, healthy eating seems linked to a reduced likelihood of depression.

Note: This document offers ideas for action to prevent health problems and take care of your health. In the case of a mental health problem, this under no circumstances replaces support, consultation with a professional or taking prescription medications. Do not hesitate to talk to your doctor.

Which foods should you eat to take care of your psychological health?



PROTEIN

Sources: legumes, fish, seafood, eggs, dairy products, meats

Proteins are made up of amino acids, some of which help to make up neurotransmitters. Produced in the brain, these molecules ensure communication between neurons. Some neurotransmitters are also involved in the managing of our emotions or stress (dopamine, nor-adrenaline, serotonin). For example, serotonin is often called “the happiness hormone.” All of these neurotransmitters are interconnected, and if their level drops significantly, you may experience a loss of motivation, trouble sleeping or getting up in the morning, sadness, etc. It is therefore important to consume an adequate amount of protein.



OMEGA-3s

Sources: fatty fish (e.g., sardines, salmon, tuna), vegetable oils (e.g., canola, nut, flaxseed), nuts (e.g., hazelnuts, almonds)

Our brain needs fat to function properly. Omega-3s ensure good communication between neurons and have proven effective in treating symptoms of depression. Finally, they are helpful because of their anti-inflammatory role.

DID YOU KNOW?

Omega-3s are considered essential acids because the human body cannot manufacture them: they must be provided through food.



MAGNESIUM

Sources: whole-grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables, nuts, seafood, certain types of water, dark chocolate

An incredible anti-stress mineral, magnesium reduces stress by preventing a rise in cortisol (stress hormone). Magnesium needs are proportional to stress: the more stressed we are, the more magnesium we need. It also helps to combat the fatigue caused by stress. A magnesium deficiency appears to increase the risk of depression.



GROUP B VITAMINS

Sources: whole grains, legumes, organ meats, wheat germ and greens for B9

Group B vitamins in general, especially B6 and B9, are involved in the synthesis of neurotransmitters. Also, B6 enhances magnesium's effectiveness by attaching it to the body's cells. B9 has proven effective in managing depression.



GOOD TO KNOW

The intestinal microbiota

The intestinal microbiota (or microbiome) is involved in many of the body's functions, including the absorption of nutrients and the proper functioning of the immune system. Many studies have been done to understand its role and especially its link to psychological health. According to researchers, there is a two-way relationship via “the brain–gut axis”: the microbiota affects the intestine, which can affect the brain, and vice versa! Further studies are needed to understand this cause-and-effect relationship, but **it appears that “a healthy microbiome is a diverse microbiome.”** For this, you need to eat foods rich in nutrients that feed the good bacteria and reduce harmful bacteria:

- **Prebiotics:** This is food for good bacteria, namely dietary fibre. Prebiotics are found in fruits and vegetables, whole-grain products and legumes (e.g., lentils, chickpeas, kidney beans).
- **Probiotics:** Sometimes there are not enough good bacteria in the microbiota (due to taking antibiotics or poor eating habits). In this case, we can remedy the problem by consuming bacteria or probiotics. This can be done through food (fermented products, yogurt, cheese, sauerkraut, etc.) or by taking dietary supplements, under medical advice.

Other advice and recommendations

- **Be physically active:** This reduces cortisol and releases serotonin and endorphins (feel-good hormones). Activities that include social interaction and being in nature also seem to have positive effects on psychological well-being.
- **Take some time for yourself:** Laughter activates the release of happiness hormones. That's why it's important to have leisure time, to take some “me time,” and take breaks to recharge your batteries!
- **Do relaxation techniques:** meditation, yoga, massage, cardiac coherence, etc. These practices are very effective in reducing stress. Massage promotes well-being through the release of endorphins. Cardiac coherence and breathing techniques reduce cortisol and therefore reduce stress.
- **Sleep well to recover:** It is important to get enough sleep and to limit screen time before going to sleep to allow for the release of melatonin (sleep hormone).

These are examples: it is important to know yourself to identify complicated or stressful situations and find your own tricks to deal with them.

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