

Nutrition

Eating a healthy diet gives your brain and your body the vitamins and minerals needed to stay well. However, healthy eating habits can be difficult to maintain, especially if you are struggling with depression or anxiety. You're not alone if you find yourself experiencing changes in your appetite as a result of your disorder, or find yourself gaining weight as a side effect of your medication. Make sure you discuss concerns about medication side effects or significant appetite changes with your healthcare provider.



Your diet affects:

- The brain neurochemistry that controls mood and response to stress
- The way your brain and body interact
- The higher brain functions that control learning, memory and intellectual functioning

Whether deciding what, when or how much to eat, the key is *balance*. The strategies and tools outlined here will help you develop a more balanced approach to eating, and to incorporate some specific ideas that may lessen your mental health symptoms.

What am I eating now?

Making changes to how you eat is simple, but not easy. Breaking bad habits and establishing new, healthy routines always requires patience. And because eating has both a physical and emotional component (providing comfort, familiarity, and even recreation), developing an achievable eating plan may be a particularly challenging part of your self-care plan.

Tips for Healthy Eating

If you have a medical condition such as diabetes or food allergies, or other dietary restrictions including those related to taking certain psychiatric medications, you should follow your healthcare provider's specific dietary recommendations.

Eat small and frequent meals. Small and frequent meals can help prevent you from getting too hungry, which can lead to overeating. This approach also feeds your brain a steady supply of glucose which helps to keep cravings at a minimum.

Keep a regular meal schedule. Eating on a regular schedule can also help prevent you from getting too hungry, help you to plan for healthier meals, and help you get a good night's sleep. Here are some tips for developing a regular eating schedule:

- Allow yourself enough time each day to have lunch and dinner. Rushing between classes can often lead to unhealthy eating options and habits.
- Even if you don't have much time for lunch on the days that you are in school, try to find a space to sit down and allow yourself as much time as possible to eat and enjoy your lunch without feeling overly rushed.
- Keep some healthy and easy-to-grab food options on hand for days when you know you will not have time to take a break. This way you can bring the food with you wherever you need to go and can still eat at or near your regular eating time.

Think ahead. Pack healthy snacks to avoid between-meal cravings.

Don't skip breakfast. Skipping breakfast is associated with reduced problem solving ability, lower energy and decreased motivation. Eating breakfast may also help you to manage your hunger and food intake throughout the day.

Try to include Omega-3 fatty acids in your diet. Research suggests that Omega-3s play a role in many brain functions, from regulating mood to increasing cognitive abilities. Omega-3s can be found in fish including tuna and salmon, or in fish oil supplements.

Remember that your beverage choices are as important as your food choices.

- Drinking plenty of water is recommended, to keep the body properly hydrated.
- Limit caffeinated beverages like coffee, soda, or energy drinks, which can have a stimulating effect at first, only to be followed by a drop in energy level and mood.
- Here are some suggestions for energy boosting snacks that can be better alternatives:
 - Fresh fruits like bananas, apples, or berries
 - Yogurt with granola
 - Low-fat cheeses
 - Almonds and walnuts
 - Hummus and red peppers
 - Half of a sandwich
 - A single-serving of popcorn

Limit fast food and junk food. Both high sugar and high fat meals can have a negative effect on mood. Use the list below for some ideas for snacks that taste good and also contain great nutrients to fuel your body:

Learn to listen to your body's signals to know when to eat, and when to stop.

- Eat when you feel physical hunger.
- Try to eat slowly and mindfully. It takes several minutes for your body to signal fullness. Enjoy each bite and avoid overeating by stopping before you feel full.

Regulate your portion size. Many of us tend to underestimate the amount of food we eat and overestimate recommended portion sizes. Visit the following website for tips on regulating portion sizes: www.choosemyplate.gov

Don't give up everything you enjoy. Give yourself permission to indulge on occasion. Remember: everything in moderation.

Pulling it all together

Just as a food journal can help you assess your current eating habits, it can also help you to track your progress as you adopt a “new” nutrition plan. A food diary can even be expanded to include recording physical activity, and to chart the emotions you experience during the day. All of this information gives you a clearer picture of how your self-care activities are working together to help you manage your mental health.



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