

# Food and mood

Eating a nutrient-dense diet reduces your risk of major depressive disorder. Equally, diets high in ultra-processed foods are associated with increased risk of depressive symptoms.

## How does it work?

- Our guts (enteric nervous system) and our brains (central nervous system) talk to each other via the gut-brain axis.
- Body processes like inflammation, oxidative stress, and our gut-microbiota (the bugs in our guts) can influence what gets said between the gut and the brain.
- Our diet influences all these processes.

In other words, what we eat affects how our guts and brains work - and therefore our mental health.



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## What should I aim for?

Every brain and body is different, and many people have specific needs to work with (e.g., food intolerances, health concerns like diabetes). It is recommended that you see an accredited dietitian to support individualized and sustainable dietary improvements.

### **Some general guidelines have been linked to reduced depressive symptoms.**

- Increase consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, seeds, herbs, and spices as tolerated.
- Limit intake of ultra-processed foods and treats, and replace highly-processed foods with minimally processed nutritious foods.
- Include a high consumption of foods rich in omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (e.g. salmon, omega-3 enriched eggs) and fibre (e.g. beans, vegetables, nuts, and fruit).
- Consume red meat in moderation and opt for lean sources rather than processed and/or fatty cuts.
- Include extra virgin olive oil or other polyunsaturated oils (e.g. rice bran, canola oil) as the main source of cooking and added oil. Avoid saturated fat sources.
- Consume the daily recommended water intake.
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption.

There is evidence linking reduced risk of depression with the Mediterranean diet, but it is not the only way to eat well. Focusing on diet quality, and eating a variety of nutrient dense, unprocessed foods is more important.

Likewise, while supplements may sometimes be needed, prioritise obtaining nutrients through real food.

## That sounds like a lot of cooking!

### **There are lots of ways to lighten the load!**

Cooking in bulk and freezing, planning meals in advance, and buying frozen vegetables, canned and dried legumes, and tinned fish can support affordable, convenient, and nutrient dense meals.