

Foods That Affect Our Mood

By Julie DeHollander, RD- Nevada County Public Health Nutritionist

Ever wonder why many of us reach for food when we are upset? Research indicates that many of us reach for crunchy foods when we're feeling angry, sugary foods when we're feeling depressed, soft and sweet foods when we're feeling anxious and salty foods when we're feeling stressed.

Carbohydrate rich foods (grains, fruit, dairy, etc.) increase serotonin, a neurotransmitter in the brain that regulates mood and appetite. Foods rich in carbohydrates create a feeling of calmness. High sugar carbohydrates supply a short burst of serotonin, which can make us feel good for a little while, but can also create a spike in blood sugar, followed by a crash. This can leave us depleted and increase cravings for more sugar. Complex carbohydrates, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes, contain fiber which helps keep blood sugar balanced. Eating a meal higher in complex carbohydrates in the evening can help to promote better sleep and relaxation. Foods that are high in protein increase the amino acid tyrosine, which is a building block for dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters that help the brain to focus. Thus, eating a protein rich breakfast with a little carbohydrate promotes energy, concentration and alertness throughout the day.

Essential fats play another important role in regulating our mood and brain function. Low omega-3 fats have been linked to depression, anxiety, inability to concentrate, irritability, low frustration tolerance, fatigue and poor sleep in adults; and increased ADHD and other learning disabilities in children. Low DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) an omega-3 fat, may impact reading, memory and behavior in children. Sources of omega-3 fats include: fish (especially cold water fish such as salmon, sardines, herring and pollock), fish oil, flaxseed, algae and walnuts. Aim for 2-3 servings of cold water fish per week, or consider talking to your health care provider about supplementation.

The timing of when you eat also has an impact on how you feel. Keeping your blood sugar balanced throughout the day can help with mood stability and sustained energy. Eating a little carbohydrate and protein at least every 4 hrs during the day can help to keep your blood sugar stable. Depending on your meal schedule, you may need to add snacks if your meals are more than 4 hrs. apart. Skipping meals or going too long between meals may increase your risk of irritability, fatigue, food cravings and over-eating. A piece of fruit paired with nuts or nut butter, Greek yogurt or cottage cheese with fruit, nuts with dried fruit or smoked salmon with crackers are examples of balanced snacks to help you keep your energy and mood up throughout the day.

Brought to you by Nevada County Public Health- Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Program