

Chow Down: How a healthy, balanced diet can improve your mental health

Source: [Mind Beacon](#)

We know eating well is good for our bodies, but did you know it's also good for our minds? Increasing evidence shows that nutrition is linked to mental health. With most of us now eating at home (and perhaps tempted to indulge more), now's a good time to check in on our eating habits, because fuelling our bodies the right way can benefit us more than we may think.

The link between food and mood

Several studies have shown a link between diet and brain health. One study compared “traditional” diets, like Mediterranean and Japanese diets, to a “Western” diet. Those on traditional diets had a 25 to 35% lower risk of depression. The authors believed this was due to traditional diets being high in vegetables, fruits, unprocessed grains, and fish. They are also void of processed and refined foods and sugars, which are more prominent in “Western” diets. Other studies have linked foods with beneficial bacteria (probiotics, which fight off “bad” germs and tame inflammation) improve mood and cognition.

The link between food and mood makes sense. Food fuels our bodies, including our brains. Foods that contain lots of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants nourish the brain and protect it from oxidative stress – the “waste” produced when the body uses oxygen, which can damage cells. Moreover, our physical health and mental health are intertwined. When we take care of our physical health by eating well, our mental health also benefits.

How to stay balanced in shaky times

Eating a balanced diet may be especially challenging right now. First, stress impacts how we eat. It can cause hormonal changes that signal the brain to crave high-fat and sugary foods. Secondly, if we're home 24/7 with families, we simply have less time to get healthy food on the table.

It's not always easy to make healthy meals a priority, but do your best to keep it on your radar. Here are a few tips that may help:

- **You know the drill: limit processed food and sugar.** Amp up protein, fibre, fruits and veggies.
- **Take stock of your pantry.** Ensure you have canned goods rich in protein, like chickpeas, legumes or canned fish. These will come in handy when you're not able to make it to the grocery store.
- **Choose one night a week to plan meals.** If you have kids, get them to help to make it fun (with a few guidelines). And it's ok if it's not gourmet!
- **Double up the recipe** so that you have leftovers.

- **Start or seek out a healthy recipe exchange.** With almost everyone now cooking most nights, chances are many are looking for simple new ways to whip up balanced meals.
- **Takeout to the rescue!** Ordering in CAN be healthy. Check online menus in advance, and select some healthy options. Plus, you support local businesses in the process.
- **Do your best.** If you slip up, it's ok. We all do. Focus on the next day.
- **Consider fasting.** Literally billions of people around the world have used limited fasts to promote health and gain mental clarity. It's a great way to lose weight and get healthy, but be sure any significant diet changes get the OK of your doctor first.

Eating a balanced diet doesn't "fix" our mental health. But, it can boost our mood, stave off feelings of anxiety and depression, and is just pretty darn good for us overall. This pandemic has given us an opportunity to have more meals at home. What we do with that opportunity is up to us.