

## PRINT-Boost Your Mood with (the right) Food

If you believe the old adage ‘the way to someone’s heart is through their stomach,’ you might consider this – the stomach also provides a direct route to their brain, or more specifically their mood.

Comfort foods might make us feel good for a moment, but if you’re looking for a longer-lasting impact, you might consider revamping your diet to include more mood-boosting foods with important vitamins that promote hormone production.

At a time when even the most resilient person is facing increased stress, anxiety and depression it’s important to note growing evidence of the strong connection between a person’s gut biome and their mental health, especially depression and anxiety.

Courtney Miller, RN., is a project manager who helps train nurses and other providers in the best practices for behavioral health throughout OSF HealthCare, a 14-hospital system based in Peoria, Illinois. Miller has advanced training around the influence of nutrition on a person’s brain chemistry.

She says the stomach is responsible for regulating mood-related hormones such as serotonin, the most well-known hormone connected with feeling good. The small intestine is where nutrients are absorbed.

“If those aren’t healthy, we’re not going to absorb the proper nutrients to really allow us to regulate those hormones and that kind of leads to some of the depressive symptoms,” explains Miller.

Can taking vitamins and probiotics help? Miller says it’s always best to get nutrients from the food we eat but supplements can help if approved by your health care provider.

“If you’ve had an antibiotic or if you have a high-stress event or something going on, it’s really good to take a probiotic to help heal that stomach and get the good bacteria levels up and not let the bad bacteria take over and not let the stomach absorb and do its job with the immune system,” she advises.

The list of foods Miller recommends include: leafy greens such as broccoli, spinach and brussel sprouts plus beans, peas, lentils, avocado and berries that are a good source of vitamin B or folate that’s needed to create serotonin. Whole grains are also rich in vitamin B so consider adding to your diet foods such as: oatmeal, whole wheat bread, pasta, or crackers, along with brown rice and even popcorn.

Vitamin D helps boost the immune system and Miller says many people don’t get enough.

“This pandemic has really highlighted how deficient as a nation our vitamin D levels are. It’s astonishing to me how we knew it was bad but we never knew it was this bad. There’s a huge correlation between severe COVID symptoms and low vitamin D levels.”

Research has also revealed a connection between vitamin D and mental health. In [one recent analysis](#) involving more than 30,000 people, those with low vitamin D levels were more likely to be depressed.

The sun provides a source of vitamin D but, especially during winter, Miller recommends finding a way to eat more vitamin D rich foods such as: fatty fish including tuna, mackerel and salmon, cheese, beef liver and other fortified foods such as cereals, milk and egg yolks.

“There are a lot of benefits to eating eggs. It has a high protein content and some people who are not comfortable eating meat are comfortable with eating eggs so it’s another good protein source.”

You should talk to a dietitian or health care provider if you plan to incorporate more eggs than you typically do in your diet, especially if you are taking cholesterol-lowering medication.

With the arrival of the flu season plus the ongoing pandemic, you should avoid sugary foods and limit the amount of alcohol and caffeine you consume. Miller suggests trying green tea that has less caffeine than coffee and has an antioxidant to boost immunity. It also has an amino acid associated with reduced stress.

If you find yourself feeling more tired, angry or sad, or if others have remarked about how you seem to be a bit off, it might be time to check in with your health provider.

Miller suggests, “Just by having the symptoms of increased anxiety or a lack of sleep or fatigue or irritability -- all of those things could be justified by drawing labs for your vitamin B levels or D and just kind of seeing where you are.”

If you're not sure what's behind how you're feeling, a helpful point of contact is a [behavioral health navigator](#), a person who is trained to help you decide what type of care will be most helpful for you and connect you with resources in your community.