



# Food and Mental Health

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A diet that shuns fruit and vegetables in favour of a diet full of fried food, processed meats, refined sugars, chocolate and excess of wheat and dairy products will not only make you fat, but can also make you more likely to suffer from depression, new research suggests.

In November 2009 the British Journal of Psychiatry reported the results of a study conducted by researchers at University College London (UCL), which analysed data on diet among 3,500 middle-aged civil servants.

Each participant in this study completed a questionnaire about their eating habits and a self-assessment report for depression five years later. The results suggested that eating an unhealthy diet increased the chances of becoming depressed by almost 60%.

What's more the team found that those who ate the most whole foods or a diet rich in fresh vegetables, fruit and fish, were 26% less likely to report symptoms of depression.

While the team noted that various aspects of lifestyle, such as taking exercise, had an effect on reducing the likelihood of becoming depressed, they concluded that diet plays an independent role.

The team at UCL claimed at the time of its publication that their study is the first to

investigate the link between overall diet and mental health, rather than the effects of individual foods. It raises some obvious concerns about the impact of diet on the future mental health of the UK population.

Lara Just, Nutritional Therapist at YourFoodAnalyst.com, says: "A major concern is that people in the UK are consuming less nutritious, fresh produce and more saturated fats, salts, highly refined sugars and processed wheat products. These have a highly 'inflammatory' effect on our bodies, if not sufficiently balanced from a range of vegetables and fruits, 'good' fats (like those from oily fish, nuts and seeds), wholegrains and good quality proteins.

This is especially true in times of recession, where we've seen the fast food industry expanding as the increase in people cutting their budgets fuels new business. To protect ourselves against the risk of both physical and mental health issues, we have to respect our bodies and what we put in them. If this means spending a little bit

more on food, it could be the best health prevention and investment in the long-term.

Recently a client in my clinic complained of low energy and moods, while being on a limited budget for food. Later it came out that this client allocated more money per week towards cigarettes than to foods. Stopping smoking and minimising alcoholic drinks when going out can save you a lot of money that could go towards good food. In any case, good, health-protecting food needn't be expensive. Even small changes to your diet and eating can make a big difference."



## Increasing awareness

Awareness about healthy diets in connection to mood and behavior in the UK has been raised through television series such as Jamie Oliver's School Dinners and many other programmes. The UK government has also produced a number of public health initiatives such as the '5-A-Day' campaign (Choosing Health) in an attempt to improve the health of the nation. Though in this Department of Health initiative both diet and mental

health are acknowledged as being key to overall wellbeing – no direct link has been made between the two.

In 2008, the Associate Parliamentary Food and Health Forum published their report including evidence to date on the influence of nutrition on mental health. The report makes key recommendations to the Department of Health to improve current public health and NHS initiatives making clear links to mental health and

demanding more funding on research on food and mental health.

Despite mounting scientific evidence, very few individual NHS providers in the country offer treatment programmes based on the association between diet and mental health (Doncaster and South Humber

Trust Food and Mood Clinic, and the Leicestershire NHS Nutrition and Dietetic Service are two that do). But by learning more about the topic yourself, learning new recipes, and finding out what works for you, you can take your own steps towards better mental health.

**Web links - find out more about food and mental health:**  
Mental Health Foundation: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)  
Mind: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)  
Food and Behavior Research: [www.fabresearch.org](http://www.fabresearch.org)

## Lara's top mood boosting foods

### 1. Oily Fish!

(2-3x a week of salmon, mackerel, trout, sardines or herring).

### 2. Green Leafy Vegetables

(spinach, dark salads, cabbage, broccoli, etc).

### 3. Good quality Protein

(lean free-range, ideally organic poultry (e.g. chicken, turkey), eggs, lentils, beans, nuts and seeds).

### 4. Wholegrains – Go Brown!

Choose less grain foods, if you do go for wholegrain versions (bread, pasta, rice). White refined versions have lost most of their nutrients, despite the law that manufacturers have to add some nutrients back into it. For example chromium, important in blood sugar control, is lost by 80-90% in white refined products.

### 5. Yoghurts

BUT the natural ones not the sweetened, it is also much cheaper to get 500g of natural organic yogurt (£1 even at Waitrose at the moment) and to sweeten it yourself with a piece of fruit; throw over some nuts or seeds and a spoonful of unsweetened muesli for a light breakfast or snack.

### 6. Dairy

Keep milk products to a minimum and ideally have fermented versions (e.g. natural yoghurt, some cheese). If having milk or soy, have a cup of semi-skimmed or full-fat milk with 1 tsp of honey and some cinnamon in the evening before going to bed. It helps with mood and sleep.

#### Simple, tasty, recession-proof recipes

### Brain Boost Breakfast Options

#### Pick-me Up Light:

200-250ml (1/2 a large pot) of natural yoghurt, 1 piece of fruit of your choice (e.g. firm banana, dark red berries – defrosted from the previous evening), add a small handful of mixed nuts (e.g. almonds, walnuts) or seeds (pumpkin, sunflower, linseeds) or 1 tsp of nut butter (almond, cashew).

#### Brain Booster:

2 poached, boiled or scrambled eggs on 1-2 medium slices of wholegrain rye bread. Add some tomatoes and mushrooms (if you like – lightly fried in olive oil) and some herbs on top.

## Lara's top 5 tips for nutritious food more cheaply

### 1. Frozen foods...

Can be cheaper if you can't afford to buy things fresh, they can often contain more nutrients too. Great value are frozen dark red berries that you can add to breakfasts and deserts, these are normally quite expensive when fresh.

### 2. Visit your local market

The food there can be cheaper and fresher than that you buy in the supermarkets.

### 3. Increase your shopping frequency

By foot if possible, the fresher the better. Go twice rather than only once a week to shop. It not only gives you fresher foods but also means improved exercise levels, saving on the gym membership! Going twice instead means you carry less than when going for one big shop a week.

### 4. Make it fun

Get the whole family involved in cooking, saving you time and making it into a social event. If you live alone, listen to some music while you prepare and cook food and then freeze some portions for later. That saves you cooking from scratch every day, minimises waste and saves you money.

### 5. Buy a cook book

Learning how to cook will save you money in the long term. I recommend the following books:

**The Top 100 Recipes for Brainy Kids**, by Christine Bailey, 2009, Duncan Baird Publishers, London, £6.99 - not only for kids! Comes in a nice small handy ring-bound copy with easy recipes. Christine studied with me and is also a Nutritional Therapist. She is also a chef and has been a health writer for over 15 years.

**The Top 100 Low-Salt Recipes**, by Christine Bailey, 2009, Duncan Baird Publishers, London, £5.99.

**Optimum Nutrition for the mind**, by Patrick Holford, 2003, Piatkus, London, £12.99.

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If you would like an extended list of top tips to stay healthy, would like to request more information about the studies referenced in this article, or have any questions about it, please contact [lara@yourfoodanalyst.com](mailto:lara@yourfoodanalyst.com)