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Nutrition and Mental Health

What impact does nutrition have on mental health?



Mental health is a trending topic, and for good reason. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 5 adults experienced mental illness in 2018, while 16.5% of youth ages 6–17 experienced a mental health disorder in 2016. The most prevalent mental health issues include anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Experts report that mental disorders are rising globally. As health care professionals and researchers work to understand these conditions and find effective treatments, it is important to explore both the impact of mental health on overall health and the role of healthy eating patterns in the treatment of mental health conditions.

Mental Health Impact on Overall Health

Health is broadly defined as “a state of physical, mental and social well-being, in addition to freedom from disease and/or illness.” In other words, health is all-encompassing. It includes daily movement, adequate sleep, a healthy eating pattern and social connections. Foundational habits that promote health contribute to improved quality of life and may reduce risk for chronic diseases.

Physical and mental health are closely linked, and research shows that mental health disorders are associated with the risk, management and progression of diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease and cancer. Mental health disorders often precede chronic health issues, while chronic diseases intensify symptoms of mental health disorders. This cycle hinders the treatment of or recovery from either challenge. Addressing mental health should be an important component of disease prevention efforts.

Mental Health and Nutrition Research

Current treatments for mental health disorders and illnesses often include medication, therapy or a combination of the two. These treatments have proven efficacy, yet mental health issues continues to rise globally. Treating mental health challenges may require other, less traditional approaches. One approach that is continually being explored is the role of nutrition in mental health. Western dietary habits, which include heavily processed foods, large quantities of refined grains and soft drinks, and little to no fresh produce, increase the risk of depression and provide fewer physical and mental health benefits.

Researchers are also studying the efficacy of individual nutrients on the treatment of mental health disorders. Some of the nutrients that are being studied include protein, omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins, folate, zinc, iron and iodine. While individual treatment with specific macronutrients may be useful in a laboratory setting or under a medical professional's care, most people will benefit from taking a broader approach to nutrition, one that focuses on the quality of food choices and the overall dietary pattern.

What Is a Healthy Eating Pattern?

The focus of nutrition research is shifting away from nutrients in isolation and toward the unique interactions that occur between nutrients in food. Eating moderate portions of a wide variety of whole, minimally processed foods will provide optimal nutrition and contribute to overall diet satisfaction. A healthy eating pattern should include foods from every food group: dairy, vegetables, fruits, whole grains and protein. Eating healthfully under this broad definition can look different depending on factors such as age, physical activity, health condition, taste preference and cultural variation.

More research is needed on the impact of individual nutrients on mental health disorders, yet it is clear there is a link between low-nutrient, highly processed diets and mental health issues. Early intervention for mental disorders is key, so ensuring children receive nourishing food and are educated about nutrition is more important than ever.

Physical and mental states are closely intertwined, and nutrition plays an important

role in maintaining a state of health and wellness. A nourished body and mind will be better equipped to handle life's challenges.

What is Healthy Eating?

Megan Holdaway, RDN, helps with understanding what foods to eat for optimal health.

[Watch here](#) →

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