



# THE BRITISH DIETETIC ASSOCIATION

*The Professional Association for Registered Dietitians*  
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# Media Release

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## **THE ROLE OF DIET IN THE MANAGEMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE USERS**

In a statement released today, The British Dietetic Association's Mental Health Group acknowledges that, whilst nutrition plays a vital role in the care of users of Mental Health Services, evidence to suggest that mental illness can be caused by or treated using nutrition alone is woefully lacking. More high-quality research is urgently needed to improve the evidence base regarding the links between nutrition and mental health.

There is national recognition of the importance of good nutrition in promoting health and recovering from illness, which is applicable to mental as well as physical health care. People with a mental illness have high rates of physical illness and are at an increased risk of developing, and dying prematurely from, e.g. coronary heart disease, obesity and some cancers, all of which are critically affected by diet.

Additionally, medication used in treating mental illness has marked side effects including weight gain, hyperglycaemia, diabetes and gastrointestinal problems which respond to long term dietary management.

Diet affects physical health and also affects brain function. The brain, like the body, requires a regular supply of energy (preferably in the form of complex carbohydrates) to maintain a steady blood glucose level. This is best obtained by eating regular balanced meals.

Sue McQuire, registered dietitian and policy facilitator of the BDA's Mental Health Group says: "There is currently no definitive evidence to suggest that mental illness can be treated using nutritional supplements, but general nutritional advice is likely to have an enormous impact on wellbeing.

"In my experience of working with users of mental health services, many have poor dietary habits, for example, they may omit breakfast and a mid-day meal. They tend to eat insufficient fruit and vegetables and have a poor intake of omega-3 fatty acids, preferring to snack on highly processed foods containing refined carbohydrates, saturated fats and salt. Such dietary patterns have been associated with raised blood fats (such as cholesterol and triglycerides), raised blood glucose and raised blood pressure levels, increasing the risk of a range of chronic diseases including coronary heart disease, obesity, diabetes and cancer.

"Furthermore, malnutrition is frequently a consequence of self-neglect, which can be a common feature of mental illness. People using mental health services can often have a lifestyle involving inadequate and disordered eating, high caffeine intakes, little physical activity and smoking, which contributes to poor physical and mental health.

"There is also evidence that mental health service users suffer discrimination and inequalities in health care and may not readily engage with primary care services. Advice to these individuals needs to be given within a safe and supportive environment by mental health professionals involved in their care.

"In the meanwhile we strongly support the urgent need for more research in this area"

For people with a range of mental illnesses, dietitians are keen to offer practical support to ensure the provision of a balanced diet to the inpatient services, give individual therapeutic dietary advice and train other mental health professionals in evidence-based nutrition.

A number of basic principles may be helpful to improve diet overall, and to increase the intakes of vitamins, minerals and trace elements, whilst potentially helping to minimise mood swings:

- Eating regular meals: breakfast, lunch and dinner
- Including complex carbohydrates (e.g. potatoes, wholegrain bread and cereals, rice, pasta) at each meal
- Eating at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables each day
- Including good sources of omega-3 fatty acids such as oily fish (e.g. sardines, mackerel) walnuts, green vegetables and seeds such as linseed
- Drinking adequate fluids, including those free from caffeine or sugar
- Decreasing the amount of salt consumed
- Preparing meals freshly using a range of fresh, frozen or canned ingredients

Ends

For interviews please contact : Kate Williams, dietitian, on 0207 919 2628 and Karen Jeffereys, Chair of the BDA Mental Health Group, on 01872 354 340

### **Notes to Editors**

1. The British Dietetic Association, founded in 1936, is the professional association for registered dietitians in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is the nation's largest organisation of food and nutrition professionals with over 5,000 members. About two-thirds of members are employed in the National Health Service. The remaining members work in education, industry, research, sport settings or freelance.
2. Registered dietitians hold the only legally-recognisable graduate qualification in nutrition and dietetics. They are experts in interpreting and translating the science of nutrition into practical ways of promoting nutritional well-being, disease treatment and the prevention of nutrition-related problems. Their advice is sound and based on current scientific evidence.
3. Registration, awarded by the Health Professionals Council, is an indication that a dietitian is fit to practise and is working within an agreed statement of conduct.
4. The Mental Health Group is a Specialist Group of the British Dietetic Association.

For further details about the British Dietetic Association, please visit our website: [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)

