

Depression and diet

This Food Fact Sheet explores the link between diet and depression, providing practical tips to support people experiencing depression to follow a balanced diet.

The symptoms of depression can make it more challenging to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Studies have shown people with depression are more likely to have an unhealthy diet and may be more likely to have heart disease or diabetes.

Should people with depression follow a special diet?

The evidence is mixed. Some diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, are often recommended for people with heart disease, diabetes and obesity. However, when it comes to depression, there is not enough good quality evidence to know if following a specific diet could help with managing the condition.

This Food Fact Sheet will therefore focus on supporting you to follow a balanced diet, as outlined in the Eatwell Guide, the UK's official visual tool for a healthy and balanced diet.

Why do I need a balanced diet?

Eating a balanced diet is important for your mental and physical wellbeing. You should try to include a range of foods from different food groups every day, in approximately the proportions shown in the Eatwell Guide, that can be found on the NHS website.

For more information on balanced eating, see our Healthy Eating Food Fact Sheet.

Although it is not necessary to eat differently if you have depression, it is helpful to be aware of the importance of certain nutrients.

Carbohydrates (e.g. bread, rice, pasta) give you glucose - the brain and body's main energy source. Skipping meals or not eating carbohydrates can lead to excessive hunger, tiredness, irritability, headaches and dizziness.

Protein (e.g. meat, eggs, beans) is needed to make neurotransmitters (the body's chemical messengers) such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, which play a crucial role in your mental health.

You also need some fat in your diet to keep your brain healthy, as the brain is made up of a high proportion of fat. Oily fish can be especially good for the brain. Try to have a small amount of fat in your diet, choosing healthier fats where possible.

It is also important to drink enough fluids (e.g. water, sugar-free squash, tea, coffee), as dehydration can make you feel irritable, anxious and low in mood. Some people also find caffeine makes them feel anxious and negatively impacts their sleep. Alcohol can negatively impact mood and sleep. If you want to cut down on caffeine or alcohol, it's best to do this gradually, and get support from your GP if needed.

How can I make balanced eating easy?

There are lots of reasons why it can be difficult to maintain a healthy and balanced diet with depression. It can be helpful to think about what is challenging for you and to think of some ideas to make things easier for you. The examples on the next page can be used to prompt a reflection or discussion with a supportive person.



Common challenge	Suggested solution
Deciding what to eat feels difficult	Keep a list of meals you like and can prepare at home. Use the list to refer to when creating a meal plan at the start of each week
Going food shopping feels overwhelming or unachievable	Keep a shopping list that you can add to as you run out of things, so you know what you need. This is easier if you plan your meals in advance. Try online food shopping. This allows you to shop when it feels most manageable, and you can avoid busy supermarkets
Cooking is overwhelming, too time-consuming or disliked	Convenient foods can still be healthy. Meal kits e.g. stir fries, curries and fajitas can be quick, balanced meals. There are also recipes online for 'one-pot meals', limited ingredients, or quick cooking times Even ready-meals and instant noodles can be made more balanced by adding frozen vegetables towards the end of cooking
Struggling to choose healthier options when food shopping	Use food labels to recognise healthier options. Try to choose food with less red and more green on the traffic light label. There is more information in the Food Labelling Food Fact Sheet
Making healthier choices is harder on low mood days	Plan ahead for days when you feel you are not able to prepare a healthy meal. If possible, try batch-cooking and freezing meals so you can reheat them when you need them
Meals sometimes feel unachievable. Snacks might feel easier	Balanced meals contain carbohydrates, fruit/ vegetables and protein, but they don't have to be served as a 'meal'. Sometimes it may be easier to put together a few things which take little preparation so you can graze on them
Low appetite or nausea*	Focus on eating regular meals so your body has the fuel it needs to function, even if the only thing you can manage is convenience food
Increased appetite*	Eating regular, balanced meals can help regulate hunger. Try to also identify if you are physically hungry or if your hunger is driven by emotions. More information about this is on our Mindful Eating Food Fact Sheet

**If you are struggling with your appetite or medication side effects, it is important you speak with your doctor.*

Be compassionate to yourself

Be kind to yourself. It is okay, and part of normal eating, if sometimes your diet is less nutritious than normal. When you feel up to it, start making small changes to improve the balance in your diet.

Top tips

1. Eat regularly and drink enough fluids to keep your energy levels steady and prevent symptoms such as headaches, irritability and anxiety.
2. Make eating easier on low-motivation days by preparing simple meals or re-heating frozen leftovers.
3. A balanced diet is good for everyone but might not always feel achievable. You might need to rely on less nutritious foods sometimes but try to have more balance when it feels manageable.

This Food Fact Sheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian.

If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or bda.uk.com/find-a-dietitian for a private dietitian. You can check your dietitian is registered at hcpc-uk.org.

This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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