

Food for... Good mental health

Around one in four of us will suffer with our mental health at some point – but certain foods might be able to help



Our Experts



**KERI
FILTNESS**
Nutritionist



CATHERINE ROGERS
Founder of ryghealth.com and author of *Gut Well Soon*.



HENRIETTA NORTON
Wild Nutrition founder & nutritional therapist



DR MICHAEL MOSLEY
(thefast800.com)



**SIAN
PORTER**
Dietician



LIBBY LIMON
Nutritionist

More and more research is showing the link between what we eat and how we feel. 'Several studies have suggested that a healthier diet, particularly one based on vegetables, fruits, fish and wholegrains, with a small amount of red meat, is useful for mental health issues,' explains Keri Filtness. The good bacteria in our gut are also said to have a potential influence on the brain. 'Our mental health is directly linked to the gut via the gut-brain axis. Addressing the health of our gut is essential for conditions like anxiety and depression,' says Catherine Rogers. So what should we be eating more or less of?



QUINOA

This grain is a good source of magnesium and B vitamins. 'These are needed to produce anti-anxiety brain chemicals such as GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid),' says Henrietta. 'Use quinoa as an alternative to rice or wheat pasta for managing anxiety and stress.'

KEFIR

Fermented foods such as kefir contain probiotics, which are beneficial for gut health. A healthy gut is closely linked to the brain and the production of neurotransmitters. These neurotransmitters can dictate your mood. 'Kefir is the best food for reaching the stomach,' says Catherine. 'In

a recent experiment the only foods that survived the equivalent of being in the stomach for 30 minutes (the same time as a meal takes to digest) were kefir and natural yogurt. It is the healthy fat content of the kefir that protects the healthy bacteria from the acid in the stomach so it can pass through to our intestine and aid digestion.'



WORDS: ELEANOR VOUSDEN. PHOTOS: GETTY, ALAMY



SALMON

Oily fish such as salmon are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are vital for brain function and mental wellbeing. 'Omega-3s can easily travel through the brain cell membrane and interact with mood-related molecules inside the brain and they also have anti-inflammatory actions that may help relieve depression,' says Libby.

The ratio between omega-3 and omega-6 from meat and dairy is also important, with the ideal ratio being around 1:1. 'However modern diets are usually around 1:15 (omega-3 to omega-6), so it is easy to see how in those with a predisposition this might translate to negative cognitive effect,' Libby says. Vegetable oils and processed foods are particularly high in omega-6, so try to reduce these.

WALNUTS

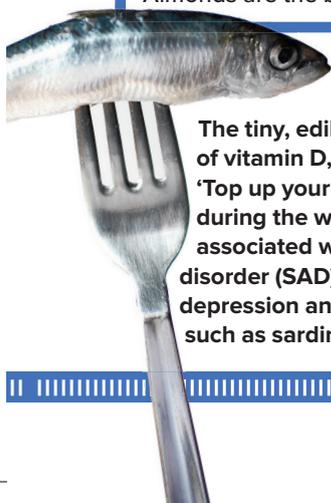
Consuming walnuts may be associated with a lower risk of depression symptoms, according to research from the University of California. A study shows that those who ate walnuts had depression scores that were 26% lower than those who didn't. 'Walnuts are a nutrient dense food and the only nut to contain significant amounts of the plant-based omega-3 fatty acid, alpha-linolenic acid,' says Sian.



BLANCHED WHITE ALMONDS

Almonds are high in mood-boosting magnesium. 'Magnesium is commonly insufficient in the western diet, and that lack is associated with depression, anxiety and insomnia,' says Libby. We're often deficient in it for two reasons – we don't eat many magnesium rich foods, and when we do, it's hard for us to absorb them. 'Almonds are the best natural food

source, but the outer brown layer contains an anti-nutrient, which binds to the magnesium to prevent absorption,' Libby says. So choosing blanched white almonds with the brown shell removed will help improve your magnesium intake. Alternatively, try Link Nutrition Magnesium (£15.95 for 30 capsules, linknutrition.com).



SARDINES

The tiny, edible bones in sardines are a great source of vitamin D, important for overall mental health. 'Top up your vitamin D, as this is difficult to obtain during the winter months and low levels are associated with conditions like seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and changes which may lead to depression and anxiety,' says Keri. Try eating oily fish such as sardines twice a week.

What to avoid...



CAFFEINE

Tea and strong coffee can cause a release of stress hormones in sensitive individuals, making us feel jittery and on edge. 'Reducing intake can really help with anxiety,' advises Libby. Try gradually cutting down to one cup of coffee or tea a day to help ease symptoms, or swap one out for a caffeine-free herbal tea.

SUGAR

'UCL research in 2017 suggested a high intake of sugary foods is more likely to



have the negative effect on mental health in the long-term. This is doubly hard as sweet food has been found to induce positive feelings in the short-term,' explains Libby. However, reducing your sugar intake can help improve your overall mental health.

SATURATED FATS

Foods like palm oil, cheese, butter, margarine and some meat products have been shown in research to affect the region of the brain known as the hypothalamus, which regulates the release of various hormones into the bloodstream. 'High levels of palmitic acid in the hypothalamus may alter a signalling pathway that researchers associate with traits of depression,' says Libby.

ALCOHOL

'Modest amounts of alcohol can raise your mood, but when you go beyond the guidelines (14 units per week, equivalent to drinking seven medium-sized 175ml glasses of wine, 12% ABV, a week) you are increasing your risk of depression and anxiety,' says Dr Michael. 'You get caught in a vicious cycle where you drink because you are anxious, stressed or unhappy, and then the alcohol makes you worse.'

