

# COPING WITH COVID-19

*Handling stress and grief during the pandemic and beyond*



## Stress Management & Food: Caring for Your Emotions with Nutrition

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We often hear that a “good” diet is an excellent stress management tool. Many Americans are eating calorie-dense but nutrient-poor diets. A poor diet may lead to chronic diseases and conditions, which increase the risk for poor mental health. And, a poor diet in general is linked to worse mental health, because the brain doesn’t have the nutrients needed to function at its best.

Have you ever found yourself reaching for something sweet/salty/baked/crunchy when you are stressed? These can be the hallmark cravings of stress eating. But as we know, stress eating can backfire, making us feel worse.

Most of us know about the **essential nutrients for good nutrition**, but don’t always practice them:

- Complex carbohydrates: whole grains, vegetables, fruits, beans (not sugary/white flour treats)
- Protein: Lean cuts of beef, pork, chicken, turkey, fish, seafood, low fat dairy, beans
- Healthy Fats: olive oil, canola oil, nuts, seeds, avocados and fatty fish
  - Omega 3 fatty acids
- Vitamins and minerals
- Water/hydration—we need 9-12 cups of fluid each day (avoid consuming excessive caffeine and added sugar. Even mild dehydration can cause fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and mood changes.
  - Note: Alcohol does not count! Alcohol is a depressant and can affect your mood negatively.

### Important Nutrients for Mood

There are a number of nutrients, which we can get from a well-balanced diet, that are needed for optimal brain function and good mental health. Even our mood is affected by our nutrition.

- Iron deficiency causes weakness and feeling tired
- Folate deficiency poses an increased chance of feelings of depression
- Selenium deficiency may increase feelings of sadness
- Magnesium plays a critical role in brain function and mood, and reduces anxiety; low levels are linked to depression.
- Zinc deficiency been shown to induce depression-like and anxiety-like behaviors, supplementation has been used as a treatment for major depression.
- Vitamin A is converted by the body to help make essential neurotransmitters that are key to mood, memory and learning.
- B vitamins, including Thiamine, Niacin and B12: deficiency causes tiredness, feelings of irritability and depression
- Vitamin C deficiency is linked to fatigue and depression.
- Vitamin D is believed to play an important role in regulating mood and warding off depression. People are more likely to become low in vitamin D during the winter months.
- Potassium deficiency has been linked to mood changes and mental fatigue.
- Omega 3 fatty acid deficits are implicated in various mood disorders, including depression.

## According to the Dietary Guidelines 2015-2020

- 75% of the population has an eating pattern that is low in vegetables, fruits, dairy, and quality oils/fats.
- More than half of the population is meeting or exceeding total grain and total protein foods recommendations, but falling short on whole grains and seafood.
- Most Americans also exceed the recommendation for sodium, saturated fat and sugar—for men no more than 9 tsp of added sugar, for women no more than 6 tsp of added sugar.

## The Gut-Brain Connection

You have probably heard of the brain chemical serotonin (the feel good chemical). While we generally hear of serotonin as being present in the brain, the truth is that most of our serotonin is found in our gut. It is estimated that 90% of the body's serotonin is made in the digestive tract. The serotonin found in the digestive tract influences both mood and GI activity.

## Best Meals to Boost Moods

The best meals to boost moods provide:

- Protein
- Complex carbohydrates (whole grains, sweet potatoes, rolled oats, beans and quinoa) which can increase the availability of the feel good chemical serotonin
- Healthy fats, for optimal brain function
- Colorful produce, which is full of vitamins and minerals that we need to make serotonin

## Eat to Feel Your Best

- Include unprocessed, “real” foods throughout the day. Start with breakfast.
- Eat at regular intervals throughout your day. (“Hangry” is not a good mood.)
- Limit sugars and processed carbs. The highs and lows associated with sugar levels can make you feel terrible.
- Limit sodium. Salt makes you retain water, and no one is cheerful when they're bloated.
- Keep hydrated. This may mean limiting caffeine, which can both dehydrate you, and contribute to jitteriness and irritability.
- Eat mindfully. Pay attention to your food as you are eating it, and you will be more satisfied than if you are distracted or rushing.

*Before making any major dietary changes, or starting on supplement doses, be sure to check with your doctor. High doses of certain vitamins and minerals can also be problematic.*

## Resources

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626>

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/gut-feelings-how-food-affects-your-mood-2018120715548>

<https://www.mhanational.org/healthy-diet-eating-mental-health-mind>

<https://www.myplate.gov/>

<https://wholegrainscouncil.org/>

<https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet>

**If anyone you know is at risk of harming themselves or is experiencing a mental health crisis, get help immediately. Call 9-1-1, go to the nearest emergency room, call the CARE team at 812-476-7200, or call the National Suicide Hotline at 800-273-8255.**

***There is no charge for a CARE Team evaluation and all evaluations are 100% confidential.***