

Food and mood

Explores the relationship between what you eat and how you feel, including tips on how to incorporate healthy eating into your life.

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<https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/2929/food-and-mood-2017.pdf>

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How can food affect mood?

Knowing what foods we should and shouldn't be eating can be really confusing, especially when it feels like the advice changes regularly. However, evidence suggests that as well as affecting our physical health, what we eat may also affect the way we feel.

Improving your diet may help to:

- **Improve your mood**
- **give you more energy**
- **help you think** more clearly

Eating Regularly

If your blood sugar drops you might feel tired, irritable and depressed. Eating regularly and choosing foods that release energy slowly will help to keep your sugar levels steady.

Slow-release energy foods include: pasta, rice, oats, wholegrain bread and cereals, nuts and seeds.

Quick tips:

- **Eating breakfast** gets the day off to a good start.
- **Instead of eating a large lunch and dinner**, try eating smaller portions spaced out more regularly throughout the day.
- **Avoid foods which make your blood sugar rise** and fall rapidly, such as sweets, biscuits, sugary drinks, and alcohol.

"I made a decision that I was going to [...] make positive lifestyle changes to try and live as happily and stress-free as I could. I gave up red meat and try to eat no sugar [and drink] hardly any alcohol."

Staying hydrated

If you don't drink enough fluid, you may find it difficult to concentrate or think clearly. You might also start to feel constipated (which puts no one in a good mood).

Quick tips:

- **It's recommended that you drink between 6-8 glasses** of fluid a day.
- **Water** is a cheap and healthy option.
- **Tea, coffee, juices and smoothies all count** towards your intake (but be aware that these may also contain caffeine or sugar).

Looking after your gut

Sometimes your gut can reflect how you are feeling emotionally. If you're stressed or anxious this can make your gut slow down or speed up. For healthy digestion you need to have plenty of fibre, fluid and exercise regularly.

Healthy gut foods include: fruits, vegetables and wholegrains, beans, pulses, live yoghurt and other probiotics.

Quick tips:

- **It might take your gut time to get used to a new eating pattern**, so make changes slowly to give yourself time to adjust.
- **If you're feeling stressed** and you think it is affecting your gut, try some [relaxation techniques](#) or breathing exercises.

Managing caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it will give you a quick burst of energy, but then may make you feel anxious and depressed, disturb your sleep (especially if you have it before bed), or give you withdrawal symptoms if you stop suddenly.

Caffeine is in: tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and other manufactured energy drinks.

Quick tips:

- **If you drink tea, coffee or cola**, try switching to decaffeinated versions.
- **You might feel noticeably better** quite quickly if you drink less caffeine or avoid it altogether.

Getting your 5 a day

Vegetables and fruit contain a lot of the minerals, vitamins and fibre we need to keep us physically and mentally healthy.

Eating a variety of different coloured fruits and vegetables every day means you'll get a good range of nutrients.

Quick tips:

- **Fresh, frozen, tinned, dried and juiced** (one glass) fruits and vegetables all count towards your 5 a day.
- **As a general rule, one portion is about a handful**, small bowl or a small

glass.

- **For ideas on how to get your 5 a day**, visit the [Centre for Health Protection's website](#).

Getting enough protein

Protein contains amino acids, which make up the chemicals your brain needs to regulate your thoughts and feelings. It also helps keep you feeling fuller for longer.

Protein is in: lean meat, fish, eggs, cheese, legumes (peas, beans and lentils), soya products, nuts and seeds.

Quick tip:

- Whatever your diet, why not do some research into other foods that contain protein, and find something new to try? For ideas on healthy recipes, visit [Gov HK's website](#), and the [Centre for Health's website](#).

Eating the right fats

Your brain needs fatty acids (such as omega-3 and -6) to keep it working well. So rather than avoiding all fats, it's important to eat the right ones.

Healthy fats are found in: oily fish, poultry, nuts (especially walnuts and almonds), olive and sunflower oils, seeds (such as sunflower and pumpkin), avocados, milk, yoghurt, cheese and eggs.

Quick tip:

- Try to avoid anything which lists 'trans fats' or 'partially hydrogenated oils' in the list of ingredients (such as some shop-bought cakes and biscuits). They can be tempting when you're feeling low, but this kind of fat isn't good for your mood or your physical health in the long run.

Managing medication

Some foods can be dangerous to eat if you're taking certain medications. For example:

- If you're taking an MAOI (a kind of antidepressant) you should avoid eating anything which has been fermented, spoiled pickled, smoked, cured, hung, dried or matured. This is because when food is exposed to the air, a substance called tyramine rises to high levels, and the interaction between tyramine and the MAOI can be very dangerous. You may also want to avoid foods and drinks containing caffeine such as chocolate, tea and coffee as these can also contain tyramine.
- If you're taking lithium, you will need to be very careful about the amount of salty foods and liquid in your diet. This is because suddenly changing the amount of salt and fluid in your body can affect your lithium level, and if your lithium level becomes too high it can be very dangerous.

- If you're taking an anti-anxiety medication such as buspirone you may need to avoid [drinking](#) grapefruit juice or eating grapefruit. This is because grapefruit can affect the way that enzymes break down medications, which can cause too much or too little of the drug to be absorbed into your blood.

Before prescribing you any medication, your doctor should fully explain any possible risks or side effects, so you can make an informed decision. If you are currently taking medication and are unsure or worried about what foods and drinks to avoid, it might help to speak to your GP. (See our pages on [psychiatric medications](#) for more information.)

For more information how to avoid interactions between food, drink and medication, see the [Drug Office from the Department of Health's information on drug and food interactions](#).

For more information about healthy eating and how food can affect your mood, visit [the HK Gov Food Safety and Nutrition \(Healthy Eating\) website](#) to read their range of food fact sheets.

How can I eat more healthily?

Eating a healthy diet can do a lot to improve your mood and sense of wellbeing. Use these tips to start making positive changes in the way you eat.

Take small steps

Making changes can be really tough – especially if you're feeling low. It might help to start by making small changes rather than changing your whole diet suddenly.

You might not feel better right away, and there might be times where you feel frustrated. But try to keep going! Even making very small changes can make a difference in the long term.

Share meals and cooking

Preparing your own food might feel daunting, but cooking with others can be a lot of fun. Ask your family, friends, colleagues, or other social groups to join in – they might be very happy to plan, cook and eat a meal together with you.

Take care of yourself

We can often put a lot of pressure on ourselves to eat a healthy diet, but it's also important to enjoy the food you eat and not be too hard on yourself.

Remember that other factors can help improve your mental health as well, such as:

- **getting physically active** (especially outdoors to boost your vitamin D levels)
- **getting enough sleep**
- **maintaining good relationships**
- **limiting the amount of alcohol** you drink.

For more information, see our tips on [how to improve your mental wellbeing](#).

Manage food intolerances

Intolerances to particular foods (such as wheat, dairy or yeast) can cause lots of unpleasant feelings, both physical and mental. If you're concerned about this, ask a health professional to help you investigate your tolerances safely.

Plan ahead

Finding the time to eat well can often be really difficult. If you have times when you're feeling well and enjoying preparing food, try making some extra meals to store. You could make enough to last for several days, and freeze them in portions to use at times when you can't face cooking.

Keep a food diary

Write down what you eat and make notes about how you're feeling. Over time you might work out how particular foods:

- **make you feel worse**, or better
- **keep you awake** or help you
- **sleep**.

Plus it can be reassuring to track improvements in your wellbeing.

Get professional support

Sometimes the best way to improve your diet is with the help of a health professional.

- Dietitians can help you work on specific problems.
- Nutritional therapists can help you improve your overall health.
- Nutritionists can help you explore how food and nutrition affect your health and wellbeing.

You could ask your family doctor to refer you. Alternatively you can find private practitioners at the [Hong Kong Dietitians Association website](#).

If you go privately it is important that you ask any professional you see about their qualifications and experience. Going privately also means that you will usually have to pay a fee.

Eating problems

Food plays an important part in our lives. Most of us will spend time thinking about what we eat, and change our habits now and again. But if your thoughts about what and when you eat feel like they're taking over your life, it can become a problem.

Eating problems aren't just about food – they can be about difficult experiences and painful feelings which you may be finding hard to face or resolve. If you're finding your relationship with food is becoming difficult, it is ok to seek help.

(See our pages on [eating problems](#) for more information, including tips on how to cope and ideas about recovery.)

The Mind Meal

This recipe is an example of how you could combine a range of proteins, omega-3 fats, vitamins, wholegrains and healthy gut foods in a single meal. It's also low in sugar, caffeine and additives.

Serves: 2–4 people

Time: about 20 minutes Skill level: very easy

Main course: pasta with pesto and oil-rich fish

You will need:

- 250g packet of wholemeal pasta
- 100g jar of pesto
- 180g tin of tuna in brine or water

Why not swap in: gluten-free pasta; nut and dairy-free pesto; any oil-rich fish, such as salmon, sardines or mackerel; soybeans; roasted butternut squash.

How to make it:

1. Cook the pasta in boiling water following the packet instructions, then drain the water.
2. Add 3 tablespoons of pesto to the drained pasta and mix together.
3. Open the tin of fish, drain the liquid, stir the fish into the pasta and serve.

Side dish: avocado salad and seeds

You will need:

- 250g mixed lettuce leaves
- 1 ripe avocado
- 50g of seeds (sunflower and pumpkin)

Why not swap in: spinach or watercress leaves; other seeds, such as flaxseed, linseed or a mixture; a light drizzle of olive oil.

How to make it:

1. Wash the salad leaves, and place on a dish.
2. Remove the skin and stone from the avocado, slice it up, and add the slices to the salad.
3. Sprinkle the seeds over the top and serve.

Dessert: fruit & yoghurt

You will need:

- fresh fruit (such as 1 apple and 1 banana)
- 8 dried apricots
- 40g broken walnuts
- 4 spoonfuls of plain probiotic yoghurt

Why not swap in: any fresh fruit, such as strawberries or pears; any dried fruit, such as cranberries; any nuts, such as almonds or pecans; dairy-free yoghurt.

How to make it:

1. Wash the fresh fruit and cut into small pieces (removing core if you want).
2. Rinse the dried apricots, cut them into quarters, then put them in a bowl with the yoghurt and fruit.
3. Serve with walnuts sprinkled over the top.

For other recipe ideas, you can refer to the [Centre for Health Protection website](#).

Useful Contacts

Who else could help?

Hong Kong Dietitians Association

<https://www.hkda.com.hk/>

Membership organisation for HK Dietitians. Provides a range of information factsheets on food and nutrition.

Hong Kong Eating Disorders Association

www.heda-hk.org/

Provides information and offers treatment sessions including dietetic consultancy and psychotherapy for individuals who are suffering from eating disorder. They also hold sharing sessions from patients, caregivers and professionals to support you and your family through the journey of recovery.

The Hong Kong Allergy Association

<https://www.allergyhk.org>

Provides information and support to people with allergies.

For more support options

Non-urgent support options, including low-cost services:

www.mind.org.hk/community-directory/

Access to quick mental health information via Help Me virtual assistant:

www.mind.org.hk/help-me/

What to do in a crisis

If you are in a crisis situation where you feel that you need urgent help:

If you feel able to, you can speak to a trusted friend or family member, or a medical or mental health professional. Starting the conversation can be hard, but these people want to talk to you and help you to cope.

If you think you may act on suicidal feelings, or you have seriously harmed yourself: Phone **999** or go to your nearest **A&E department**.

Suicide 24 Hour Hotlines:

The Samaritans Befrienders: **23892222**

The Samaritans (multilingual): **28960000**

Suicide Prevention Services (Cantonese only): **23820000**

For more places to seek urgent support (including additional hotlines):

www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now/

For further information on how to seek help in Hong Kong visit:

www.mind.org.hk/getting-help/

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About Mind HK

Mind HK is a registered S88 charity (91/16471) committed to improving awareness and understanding of mental health in Hong Kong. We collaborate with other local and international mental health charities and provide online support and training programmes, based on global best practice, to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem and equip them with the resources they need. Through collaborative research, Mind HK is leading the way in understanding mental health problems in the city and providing its population with the right support and resources.

For more on Mind HK and its mission and vision, please visit: www.mind.org.hk



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