

RESILIENCY

NUTRITION & MENTAL HEALTH

Did you know May is Mental Health Awareness Month? Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization, is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health is often used interchangeably with mental illness, but it is important to note that mental health is more than just the absence of a mood disorder or mental illness. Mental health is an integral part of everyone's overall wellbeing.

While there are many resources to help improve mental health--including behavioral counseling--food and nutrition is often overlooked. As we learn more about the science of gut health and its connection to our brain, we now know that our food choices play a critical role in our mental health, thus affecting our mood, energy, focus, memory retention, and more. Here are some foods and nutrients to consider including in your eating pattern to work toward better mental health:

Omega-3's. Omega-3's have been long known for their positive effects toward heart health, but studies also show a strong link between regular consumption of foods with omega-3 and a lowered risk of developing dementia, depression, and anxiety. Foods high in omega-3 include fatty fish like salmon and sardines, and plant-based sources like walnuts, chia seeds, flax seeds, and foods containing algae like seaweed.

Zinc. Studies have shown that zinc supplementation may help reduce symptoms of depression; in some studies, zinc supplementation has been able to successfully replace antidepressant medication. The research is still in the preliminary stages and more studies are needed, but there is enough information to support the idea that regular consumption of zinc-rich foods also supports better mental health. Foods high in zinc include legumes, shellfish like shrimp, as well as nuts and seeds.

B Vitamins. Vitamins B12 and B9 (folate) in particular seem to have a more influential role as studies suggest they may reduce stress and inflammation in the brain, improving memory and ability to focus. Good sources of vitamin B12 are primarily animal-based such as fish, meat, dairy, and eggs. Vitamin B9 sources, however, are more plant-based and found in leafy greens like spinach, kale, collard greens, as well as nuts and seeds.

Vitamin D. Low levels of vitamin D have been associated with increased risk of depression and seasonal affective disorders (also known as the "winter blues"). Sun exposure is one of the best ways to get vitamin D, but this proves to be difficult during colder seasons. Food sources of vitamin D include fatty fish like salmon and sardines, egg yolks, and fortified foods like breakfast cereals, milk, and certain brands of milk alternatives.

While there may be many other nutrients that support mental health, these are the few that are well-researched at this time. To better ensure you are eating adequate amounts of nutrients that support mental health, try following a plant-forward diet that focuses on a variety of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. You can also follow the Mediterranean Diet which has proven to be effective in reducing risk of various chronic illnesses, as well as supporting mental health.