

Food and Mood

Have you ever felt hangry (hungry + angry)? Food and mood have an effect on one another. Understand how they interact so you can make good diet choices and avoid emotional or impulse eating.

Maybe it's no coincidence that food and mood are just a letter apart; the two are peas in a pod. Think about it: you stick to a giant dinner salad on a "winning it" kind of day, and reach for a tub of ice cream after a bad date or a frustrating day at work.

It's a delicate relationship, and it can spin out of control if you're not careful. Let's look at the food-mood relationship, and how to set it right again when it goes wrong.

The First Craving

Even if you maintain a healthy diet, it's normal to desire high calorie, unhealthy treats when stressed or depressed.¹ This makes sense: your body wants to fuel up for fight-or-flight mode when times get tough, but it can mistake the stress of fighting traffic on the freeway for fighting predators on the savanna. It's no wonder a whole pizza, a plate piled with fried chicken, or a chocolate milkshake can seem like a cure for a downer of a day--there's a reason it's called "comfort food."

Vicious Cycle

A cheat meal every now and then can be okay, but if you use food to battle the blues, you're going to lose the war. Research shows that foods full of fat and sugar only increase the likelihood of depression and anxiety, and that means you'll only want more sugary junk to fight the new bad mood.² This cycle is a feedback loop.

The Downward Spiral

If the consumption of fats and sugar goes on too long, your body will adapt to it, and think it's normal. Then, when you try to start eating right, you could throw off your system and further increase anxiety and depression, trapping you in a cycle of bad eating to try to maintain happiness.² It's a terrible place to be.

Breaking the Cycle

There's a way avoid the downward spiral; you're not trapped. In the same way that unhealthy comfort food can keep you feeling low, healthy food can boost you up. In one study, the happiness that came from eating eight portions of fruits and vegetables a day was equal to the joy experienced by an unemployed person finding a job.³ That's a huge lift in attitude!

Things Keep Looking Up

When you're happier, you're more likely to crave healthy foods. In one study, participants watching a happy movie opted for grapes, while those watching a sad movie reached for the popcorn.⁴ It's easier to stay healthy when you stay happy. And don't forget, eating healthier helps you stay happier.

Up, Up, and Away!

The best part? There are long term mental health effects to eating well. Research has shown that healthy choices, like the Mediterranean diet, full of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, can help keep depression at bay,⁵ stabilizing mood and keeping you out of the danger zone where it feels like only a cupcake will save the day.

Good Mood Foods

There are some specific foods to keep an eye on to boost your mood:

1. Fruits and Vegetables -- An apple a day keeps the doctor away--and maybe the psychiatrist, too. As noted, fruits and veg have been linked to higher levels of happiness.³
2. Omega-3 Fatty Acids -- This is the good stuff, found in foods like fish and nut oils. Low Omega-3 fatty acids have been correlated to depression and impulsivity. Getting plenty of this in your diet keeps your levels high, that's a good thing.²
3. Chocolate -- As a special treat, chocolate may have properties that improve mood and even reduce tension. But remember, the key is to choose real chocolate (dark is best), and in moderation.²

Start Now: Break the Bad Mood/ Bad Food Cycle

Stock up on convenient and healthy snacks, like bananas or individual bags of nuts or carrots. Keep them within easy reach at home, work and in the car. Now, the next time a craving or bad mood hits, you can reach for some mood-boosting goodness.

Now eat right, so you'll be in the mood to be healthy for good!