



Food and Mood- Eating Your Way To Happiness

Neurotransmitters: biochemical messengers that carry signals from one brain cell to another, enabling different parts of the brain to 'talk' to each other. Some neurotransmitters stimulate the brain, others have a calming or sedative effect.

- Protein foods such as meat, fish, poultry, dairy and eggs provide the amino acids from which neurotransmitters are made.

Tryptophan: the amino acid tryptophan is converted to the brain chemical, or neurotransmitter, serotonin. Serotonin helps to promote a positive and calm mood. Low serotonin levels are associated with depression, anger, irritability, impulsivity, poor sleep and carbohydrate and sweet cravings.

- Tryptophan-containing foods include: chicken, pork, beef, cheese (eg cottage cheese, cheddar cheese), tuna, salmon, soya products (eg tofu and soya milk), eggs, whole wheat spaghetti, kidney beans, quinoa, nuts, sunflower seeds, lentils, milk, yogurt.

Causes of Serotonin Deficiency: lack of tryptophan in the diet, hormone imbalances, lack of exercise, dieting, stress, vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

- Carbohydrates help tryptophan to enter the brain, and therefore they are important for serotonin production.
- Dieting: serotonin levels may drop, leading to sweet cravings, which may make weight management difficult.
- Low oestrogen levels: some women are prone to depression pre-menstrually and during the menopause, because low oestrogen can lead to low serotonin levels.

Tyrosine: converted to the neurotransmitters dopamine, noradrenaline and adrenaline.

- The amino acid tyrosine is produced from phenylalanine, which is obtained from dietary protein such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy and soya. Dopamine, noradrenaline and adrenaline 'perk up' the brain and are involved in motivation and pleasure. Deficiencies in these neurotransmitters may lead to low energy, poor motivation, apathy and/or cravings for stimulants, such as caffeine, sugar and alcohol.

Blood Sugar: high GI foods such as biscuits, cakes, white bread, white rice, potatoes, sugary cereals and high-sugar fruit juices cause large fluctuations in blood sugar levels as they are digested quickly, causing a sudden surge of glucose into the bloodstream, followed soon afterwards by a sudden drop. Large blood sugar fluctuations can result in symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, poor concentration/memory, mood swings, restlessness and becoming easily frustrated/angry.

Low GI foods such as oats, pulses, wholemeal bread, wholemeal pasta and nuts have a more steady effect on blood sugar levels because they are digested more slowly, causing a slower release of glucose into the bloodstream, and are therefore more likely to have a positive effect on mood. Protein foods such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs and cheese also have a steady effect on blood sugar.

To balance blood sugar:-

- Eat some protein with every meal.
- Eat regularly, ie 3 meals and 2 snacks a day, to avoid large dips in blood sugar and the associated effects- never skip meals.
- Eat 'slow-releasing' carbohydrates. Try the following:-
 - ✓ Oat porridge, All Bran or unsweetened muesli instead of cornflakes, Rice Krispies, Cheerios and other cereals with added sugar.
 - ✓ Wholemeal bread instead of white bread.
 - ✓ Brown rice instead of white rice.
 - ✓ Oat cakes instead of sweet biscuits for a snack.

Tip: the more fibre a food contains, the more of a steady effect it has on blood sugar levels.

There are some high GI foods that are nutritious, and which can be combined with low GI foods and/or protein foods to help balance blood sugar, such as:-

- ✓ Jacket potato with ham and cheese.
- ✓ Corn Thins with peanut butter or houmous.
- ✓ Dried fruit as a snack with nuts and/or seeds.
- ✓ Melon, grapes or pineapple with a piece of cheese and/or slices of ham.
- ✓ Risotto rice with chicken.

Essential Fats: Omega 3, contained in oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines and herring, as well as flax seeds/flax seed oil, hemp oil, walnuts and pumpkin seeds, is very important for brain function and mood. Regular consumption of oily fish may help to prevent depression.

Omega 6 is found in sunflower, sesame, safflower oil (and hemp seed oil- the best balanced source of omega 3 and omega 6) and pumpkin seeds. It helps insulin to work, and is therefore important for blood sugar balance.

When fat is eaten with a carbohydrate food, it works in the same way as adding protein, slowing down the rate at which food enters the intestine, keeping you fuller for longer and steadying blood sugar levels.

Tip: include nuts, seeds, avocado and oily fish in the diet. Drizzle good quality, cold-pressed sesame or sunflower oil or extra virgin olive oil over roasted vegetables just before serving, and/or drizzle oils over salads.

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