



Depression, Diet and Exercise

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When we are depressed, we often feel that our sadness, hopelessness and anxiety will never end. We may also experience a general lack of caring for ourselves which can often lead to unhealthy eating and being sedentary. We may “rationalize” this behavior by saying--- “Why should I take care of myself if I feel so awful?” We tend to be drawn toward foods that will comfort us right way and many of those are unhealthy, such as sugary, fried and/or highly processed foods.

What’s interesting is that many of these foods increase our serotonin levels (the neurotransmitter in our body that regulates our mood), and many do so very quickly. High serotonin levels contribute to good moods, low serotonin levels contribute to low moods. This is why we crave “junk” foods when we are feeling down. The problem is that these unhealthy comfort foods only increase serotonin temporarily and our mood tends to crash quickly. Our blood sugar tends to as well, so we can often end up in a worse mood with elevated feelings of depression.

Luckily, there are a lot of really delicious and healthy foods that will increase our serotonin levels, result in fewer drops and help relieve or completely alleviate depression. These foods and combinations of foods, along with exercise, can be as effective or even more effective than anti-depressant medications. Some people’s depression may also need to be treated in different ways such as with talk therapy, light therapy, medications, etc.

Below are some of the foods and other strategies that have been shown to alleviate depression:

- 1) Extra Virgin Olive Oil** – A study done in Spain showed that people who ate a diet high in hydrogenated fats had a 48% increased risk in depression while those eating olive oil had a significantly lower risk of depression. It is important to get a good quality anti-inflammatory extra virgin olive oil (recommendations: California Olive Ranch, Costco’s Kirkland brand or Trader Joe’s Extra Virgin from Greece).

- 2) **Foods high in L-Tryptophan** – Tryptophan is an amino acid that helps to create serotonin. Everyone thinks of turkey when tryptophan is mentioned, but it appears that the best foods for increasing serotonin levels are more likely vegetarian sources such as seeds and fruit. Tahini, which is sesame paste used in hummus is a wonderful source of tryptophan and hummus has many components that are helpful in improving mood. Here are some other foods that are high in tryptophan: Soybeans, sunflower seeds, oats, chickpeas, wheat flour and dark chocolate.
- 3) **Fruits and Vegetables** – A recent comprehensive review of all published studies done on fruit and vegetable intake and depression showed that those with the highest fruit intake decreased their risk of depression by 14% and those with the highest vegetable intake decreased their risk by 11%
- 4) **Foods high in Omega 3 fats** – Fatty fishes (Ocean salmon, mackerel, albacore tuna), walnuts, almonds, flax seeds are foods that are high in the essential fat: omega 3. Low levels of omega 3 fats in the body has been correlated with increased rates of depression. Try to get an omega 3 fat food in your diet every day.
- 5) **The Mediterranean Diet** – A recent study in Australia looked at the role of diet and depression. They began with 67 people with depression symptoms who were all eating an unhealthy diet. Half the people were given nutrition counseling only. The other half were given nutrition counseling plus they were to eat a “modified” Mediterranean Diet. After 12 weeks, 1/3rd of those eating the Mediterranean Diet improved so much that they were no longer considered depressed. The foods folks were encouraged to eat were: whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, low-fat/ unsweetened dairy, raw unsalted nuts, lean red meat, chicken, fish, eggs, and olive oil. The foods they were discouraged from eating? Sweets, refined cereals, fried food, fast food, and processed meat.
- 6) **Exercise** – Finally, let’s talk about moving. Although food is incredibly important for depression, exercise is also very important. Regular aerobic exercise has been shown to be as effective as anti-depressants for most types of depression. Even walking 30 minutes per day has been shown to significantly reduce depression in depressed middle aged women.

In sum, here are the basic recommendations for relieving depression:

- 1) **Eat a Mediterranean Diet** high in olive oil, fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains, fatty fishes and small amounts of poultry and meat.
- 2) **Move every day** – Even if it is a short walk, but preferably including some weight bearing and aerobic exercise.

If your depression doesn’t respond to dietary and exercise changes, you may also consider seeing a psychiatrist/therapist, nutritionist, herbalist, or faith-based support person. There are many sources of help.

The MIIA Employee Assistance Program, EAP, provides confidential and free counseling and referrals on a variety of personal and work-related matters. Call 800-800-451-1834 to speak to someone. Reach out, help is there for you.