

# Healthy Gut, Healthy Mind: 5 Foods to Improve Mental Health

Five foods for better mental health

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You've heard of eating well to improve heart [health](#) and reduce the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and certain cancers, but what about taking care of your mind? A few simple dietary changes may boost [cognitive](#) function and reduce symptoms of [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and other mental health disorders.

When most people think of boosting their [brain](#) power, they think of learning something new or engaging in thought-provoking debate. As it turns out, one of the best ways to improve your mental health is through your gut. Like your brain, the gut has its own nervous system, which sends information to the brain via the vagus nerve. This helps explain why you might feel queasy when you're nervous or stressed. Just as the brain impacts the gut, what we put in our gut can impact the functioning of the brain. Here are five foods that keep the mind working at its best:

## #1 Fatty Fish

The Standard American Diet is sorely deficient in [omega-3](#) fatty acids, such as docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentanoic acid (EPA), and high in [trans](#) fats and saturated fats which have been shown to negatively affect the brain. Since our brains are made up largely of fat and our bodies cannot manufacture essential fatty acids, we have to rely on a diet rich in omega-3s to meet our daily needs.

In studies, foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as wild cold water fish (e.g., salmon, herring, sardines and mackerel), seaweed, chicken fed on flaxseed and walnuts, have been shown to reduce symptoms of schizophrenia, depression, [attention deficit](#) hyperactivity disorder and other mental disorders. This is likely because of the effect omega-3s have on the production of neurotransmitters (brain chemicals responsible for our moods), including [dopamine](#) and serotonin. By supporting the synapses in the brain, omega-3s also boost learning and [memory](#).

## #2 Whole Grains

The primary source of energy for the brain is glucose, which comes from carbohydrates. Simple carbohydrates exacerbate low mood by creating spikes in blood sugar and have been shown to have effects on the brain similar to [drugs](#) of abuse. By contrast, complex carbs release glucose slowly, helping us feel full longer and providing a steady source of fuel for the brain and body. Healthy sources of complex carbohydrates include whole-wheat products, bulgur, oats, wild rice, barley, beans and soy.

## #3 Lean Protein

The foods we eat are broken down into substances that are used to make neurotransmitters and other chemicals that allow different parts of the nervous system to communicate effectively with each other and the rest of the body. Next to carbohydrates, protein is the most abundant substance in the body. The amino acid tryptophan, a building block of protein, influences mood by producing the neurotransmitter serotonin.

Sometimes called [nature's](#) Prozac, serotonin is associated with depression. Lean protein sources, including fish, turkey, chicken, eggs and beans, help keep serotonin levels balanced. Even more important are complex carbohydrates, which actually facilitate the entry of tryptophan into the brain, reducing the symptoms of depression and anxiety and improving overall cognitive functioning.

## #4 Leafy Greens

Popeye was on to something with a diet high in spinach. Leafy greens such as spinach, romaine, turnip and mustard greens, and broccoli are high in folic acid, as are beets and lentils. Deficiencies in folate as well as other B vitamins have been linked with higher rates of depression, fatigue and [insomnia](#).

Broccoli also contains selenium, a trace mineral that plays an important role in our immune system functioning, reproduction and thyroid hormone metabolism. Some studies suggest that low levels of selenium contribute to depression, anxiety and fatigue. Other sources of selenium include chicken, onions, seafood, walnuts and brazil nuts, and whole-grain products.

## #5 Yogurt with Active Cultures

Fermented foods, such as yogurt with active cultures, kefir, kimchi, tempeh and certain pickled vegetables, contain probiotics (healthy bacteria) which have been shown in studies to reduce anxiety and [stress hormones](#) and effect the

neurotransmitter GABA. By contrast, eating too many processed foods may compromise the delicate balance of healthy and unhealthy bacteria in the gut.

### **Today's Choices Affect Tomorrow's Welfare**

Our modern diet is significantly different from that of our ancestors. We can blame busy lifestyles, food manufacturing and the affordability of processed foods, but most of us can make changes to counteract these influences; for example, increasing our intake of fruits and vegetables, limiting processed foods that come from bags and boxes, and cooking meals from scratch.

Sadly, the genetic and environmental influences passed down by our ancestors, though far from perfect, were likely better than the ones we're passing on to future generations. An emerging body of research is showing that the way we eat today not only affects our own health but also that of our children and grandchildren.

[Nutrition](#) is a key contributor to good mental health, but it's just one piece of the puzzle. Dietary changes won't be sufficient for everyone and are not a substitute for other forms of treatment. If you're struggling with symptoms of a mental health disorder, talk to a therapist or your family physician.