



5.22.19 / [Nutrition](#)

## What you Eat Affects How You Feel

By [Ana Blanco, MS, RDN, CDN](#)

What we eat matters for both our physical and mental health. In fact, diet is such an important component of mental health, affecting mood, well-being and risk for depression, that it has inspired a new field of medicine called nutritional psychiatry. Interestingly, nutrition may impact men and women differently. According to recent research, men are more likely to experience mental well-being until nutritional deficiencies arise; while women are less likely to experience mental well-being unless a well-balanced diet and healthy lifestyle is followed.

### The Food-Brain Connection

Many studies have found a link between diets containing a variety of fruits and vegetables and improved mental well-being. Dietary patterns like the Mediterranean diet, which are higher in plant foods, such as vegetables, fruits, legumes and whole grains, and lean proteins, including fish, are associated with a reduced risk of depression; while dietary patterns that include more processed food and sugary products are associated with an increased risk of depression. This is likely due to the density of anti-inflammatory **micronutrients and antioxidants found in fruits and vegetables** that are generally supportive of brain health and contribute to the synthesis of hormones such as serotonin and dopamine, which promote happiness and regulate mood. The connection between the consumption of **omega-3 fatty acids** and decreased incidence of depression is well established. These fatty acids have anti-inflammatory properties as well and can travel through the brain cell membranes to interact with mood-related molecules inside the brain. **Vitamin D** is also associated with mental health and well-being. Fatty fish, like tuna, mackerel and salmon, which are high in omega 3s, are also good sources of vitamin D. It is not easy to get vitamin D from food only, though and the body makes vitamin D also from the sun's ultraviolet rays. In fact, the best way to ensure adequate vitamin D is to expose your bare skin to sunlight for 10-15 minutes at least three times a week. Older adults and people with darker skin are not able to make the same amount of vitamin D from sunlight, so they should regularly include good food sources of vitamin D in their diet.



From the God's Love Kitchen: Ginger Glazed Salmon with Asian Slaw

## What to Eat

In order to reap the brain benefits from food, focus on eating a variety of fruits and vegetables; whole grains, like whole grain rice, barley, quinoa, buckwheat, bulgur or cracked wheat, oats, 100% whole grain bread; legumes; fish; olive oil; seeds and nuts; while limiting high fat meat and dairy, refined grains and processed foods. Try to “eat the rainbow”; look for produce in a variety of colors like leafy greens, sweet potatoes, blueberries, peppers and more. These colorful foods contain phytonutrients that combat inflammation and benefit the brain. Choose fish, like salmon and mackerel a couple of nights a week and include walnuts, chia seeds and flaxseeds in your salads, cereal and smoothies.

Try this brain boosting [salmon with coleslaw recipe](#) from our kitchen! Serve it with couscous, whole grain rice or barley for a complete meal

## Resources

<https://bmcmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-017-0791-y>

[www.health.harvard.edu/blog/diet-and-depression-2018022213309](http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/diet-and-depression-2018022213309)

[www.health.harvard.edu/blog/omega-3-fatty-acids-for-mood-disorders-2018080314414](http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/omega-3-fatty-acids-for-mood-disorders-2018080314414)

[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30028276](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30028276)

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