



## Linking Exercise and Nutrition to a Healthy Mind

**Healthy Lifestyles Report:** We have heard it before, eating well and regular exercise are important factors in maintaining a healthy body, but what do those actions mean for your mental health?



In this edition of Life Lines, we explore ways in which you can improve your mental health through exercise and eating nutritious foods.

Mental health disorder research findings suggest that between ten and thirty percent of adults suffer from mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety. As a result of these disorders becoming more commonly diagnosed, physicians have been looking for natural methods to support their patients in treatment of mental health without medication. What the research is beginning to show is that people who suffer from depression or anxiety may improve their overall mental health through a balanced diet and regular exercise.

### **Exercise improves mental health**

Physical exercise is increasingly being advocated as a means of maintaining and enhancing positive mental health. Findings suggest that getting twenty to forty minutes of aerobic activity can result in a reduction of anxiety for several hours.

### **Exercise tips to improve mind and body:**

Getting started can be difficult, so start with small, manageable increments of physical activity and then slowly build to regular, more frequent exercise sessions. Setting exercise goals and being active for one day a week can begin your transformation of mind and body. If physical activity is difficult for you, using distraction

methods such as listening to music or working out with a friend can help you develop a regular routine.

**The benefits of jogging:** Aside from the obvious physical health benefits, jogging for 30 minutes can also help with reducing stress, building confidence, improving focus, memory and overall attitude. Jogging once a week begins transforming the mind and body through positive endorphins which can result in one wanting to do it even more.

**Walking at work:** Making time to exercise can sometimes be difficult, so why not start with little steps throughout the workday to increase your physical activity. Try parking further from the door, taking the stairs, or having your lunch or meeting on the go. Make yourself accountable by challenging a friend or co-worker to do the same. Give yourself an extra challenge by adding ankle weights, helping to build your muscles and stamina.

**Make exercise fun:** Finding out what physical activity you enjoy is important to your journey of increasing physical activity. From gardening, to hiking, to yoga or even a simple walk around the block, there are several ways one can become more active. Tracking activity through fitness apps can help build a routine of physical activity and allow you to continue to challenge yourself.

## Results of exercise and how it will help you:

As we have discussed various methods of getting active to improve your mental health, here are some of the health benefits from regular exercise you will begin to experience:

- Improved sleep
- Stress relief
- Improvement in mood and disposition
- Increased energy and stamina
- Reduced fatigue that can impair mental awareness
- Weight reduction
- Reduced cholesterol and improved cardiovascular fitness

When beginning your journey of increasing your physical activity, remember to be patient with yourself; it takes time to get into the habit of exercising regularly. Realise that any small step taken to increase your level of physical activity is better than not doing anything at all.

## What you eat is what you feel

Trying to eat healthy when we are feeling low can be challenging, especially since typical comfort foods don't tend to be the most nutritious. We often try to eat well for our physical health, but research suggests that healthy eating also plays a key role in mental health. When we don't eat enough nutrient-rich foods, our body lacks vital vitamins and minerals, often affecting our energy and brain function. When certain nutrients are lacking in the diet, mood disorders, like depression, are more common. So, while it may be tempting to turn to a sweet treat for a mood boost, focusing on nourishing foods is much more likely to give you an emotional lift without the fall.

## Here are a few tips on key nutrients to fuel your mind and body:

**The power of protein:** Protein is often praised for building muscle, but the role of protein goes far beyond the gym. Proteins are made up of amino acids; the precursors of neurotransmitters, which chemically transmit information from one nerve cell to another. Neurotransmitters increase levels of alertness and energy, while certain neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine are especially important for mental health. Protein rich foods contribute to improved cognitive functioning and

wellbeing by increasing the quantity of neurotransmitters available in the brain. Fish, poultry, meat, eggs, nuts, seeds, lentils and beans are excellent sources of protein.

**B vitamins for vitality:** Dark leafy greens such as kale and spinach, citrus fruits, fortified breakfast cereals and beans are rich in Folate, a B vitamin often deficient in people with depressive symptoms. Folate deficiency can cause serotonin levels in the brain to decrease, a key neurotransmitter which regulates our moods and how we feel. Sardines, salmon and eggs are excellent sources of this vitamin.

**Get your omega-3 fatty acids:** Essential fatty acids can alter the composition of nerve cell membranes. In fact, some studies have suggested that 250-500 mg per day of omega 3 fats may reduce symptoms of depression in some individuals, though the evidence is not conclusive. Instead of reaching for supplements, which may not be right for everyone, enjoy omega-3 rich fish such as salmon, mackerel, trout, or sardines at least twice a week. And what's even better - these foods are also an excellent source of protein, calcium, and Vitamin D.

**Enrich your diet with magnesium:** Magnesium is required for over 300 separate biochemical pathways, such as the metabolism of energy and the production of protein. This important mineral also activates the enzymes needed for serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine production, which, if deficient, can cause symptoms of depression. Food sources for magnesium include nuts and seeds, dark green vegetables such as spinach, whole grains such as brown rice and bran.

**Get a good source of selenium:** Another mineral that can affect mood, selenium plays a key role in thyroid function. A healthy thyroid supports positive mental health which could reduce the risk of depression. Food sources of selenium include Brazil nuts, fish, shrimp, liver and chicken.

This information is a guide to exercise and eating well for your mental health. Before making changes to your exercise regimen or diet you should consult with your doctor.

For more information, please call:

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