



PREVENTING DEPRESSION THROUGH FOOD IN EUROPE

DEPRESSION

Depression is a debilitating mental illness affecting a growing number of people. For those who suffer from depression, it impacts how they feel, think and act. It can have devastating consequences for relationships, threatening livelihoods and lives. The financial burden of mood disorders costs the European Union an estimated €170 billion every year.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

- Depression affects approximately 30 million people (7% of the European population) each year and is a major challenge to all European health systems.
- 5.3% of men currently suffer from depression
- 8.8% of women currently suffer from depression
- Depression is present in up to 25% of people visiting family doctors, though an estimated 50% of cases go untreated.

CAN WHAT WE EAT REDUCE OUR RISK OF DEPRESSION?

Prevention is the most cost-effective strategy to addressing the burden of depression. As awareness of depression grows, more and more people are searching for strategies to improve and protect their mental health through food. This has led to a lot of hype around foods that are thought to cause or protect us from depression. Can what we eat really support our mental health? The answer is 'Yes!'.

WHAT ARE THE RECOMMENDATIONS?

- Following a healthy dietary pattern, consistent with national dietary guidelines, may reduce depressive symptoms and improve mental health.
- Strong evidence does not support taking nutritional supplements for the prevention of depression.
- For people with obesity, strong evidence supports that weight loss can help reduce depressive symptoms.

WHAT SHOULD BE EATING?

We should be eating in line with national dietary guidelines, including:

- Lots of fruits and vegetables
- More legumes
- Wholegrain breads and cereals
- At least one serving of oily fish a week
- Dairy products
- Healthy vegetable oils
- Lower amounts of red and processed meats

WHERE DID THESE RECOMMENDATIONS COME FROM?

In 2014 the European Commission funded the MoodFOOD project. This was a multi-centre research project involving 14 organisations with expertise in nutrition, preventative psychology, consumer behaviour and psychiatry across Europe. By conducting new experimental research and extensive reviews of the research field the MoodFOOD team answered the question 'can what we eat help prevent depression?'. Assessing the strength of evidence for the role of foods, dietary patterns, nutrients, supplements, weight loss and food related behaviours they developed the recommendations above.

WHAT ARE WE EATING?

Over the last decades, diets in Europe have become increasingly reliant on more convenient, industrially prepared meals and energy-dense food products. In many European countries current intake of fruits, vegetables, legumes and fish is below recommendations. At the same time intakes of added sugar, unhealthy fats and salt are above recommendations. These patterns indicate many Europeans are not consuming a healthy dietary pattern which may be putting them at increased risk of NCDs, including developing depression.

CAN WE FIX THE PROBLEM BY TAKING NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS?

The MoodFOOD project also investigated the potential of nutritional supplements in preventing depression. After extensive reviews of available research, and testing a multi-nutrient supplement in the MoodFOOD randomised controlled trial, they found no evidence to support the theory that nutritional supplements prevents the development of depression or reduce depressive symptoms.

ARE THERE FOODS WE SHOULD AVOID?

Currently, there are too few studies supporting that eating an unhealthy dietary pattern can increase our risk of depression. The focus should therefore be placed on increasing our intake of healthy foods such as vegetables, fruits, legumes, fish, healthy oils and wholegrain cereals. A healthy dietary pattern does however include low intake of red meat (just one serving a week), and avoiding processed meats.

IS A HEALTHY DIETARY PATTERN FOR THE PREVENTION OF DEPRESSION ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE?

Yes! As people move towards a healthy dietary pattern that is rich in plant foods like fruits, vegetables and legumes, contains a moderate amount of sustainably sourced fish and low intake of red meat their environmental footprint is reduced.

CAN HEALTHY EATING REPLACE MENTAL HEALTH CARE?

No. While eating a healthy dietary pattern may help to reduce the risk of developing depression – it should only be part of the care package. It cannot replace appropriate mental health care and medication.

DEPRESSION AND NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES (NCDs)

Depression is a major contributor to non-communicable diseases- increasing the risk of high blood pressure, myocardial infarction and stroke. A healthy dietary pattern may lower the risk of not only depression, but also heart disease, diabetes and some forms of cancer.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These new findings on the role of healthy eating in the prevention of depression enable new recommendations for general practitioners, dietitians and psychologists as well as added support for current diet and NCD policy agendas in the European region.

Improved mental health can now be promoted as an added benefit of healthy eating. It also provides greater emphasis for the importance of diet as a common modifiable risk factor in the prevention of NCDs, including depression. This provides greater support for synergetic strategies in order to achieve policy indicators following the recent addition of mental health to the global NCD policy agenda as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.

Strengthened action and advocacy on the role of healthy dietary patterns in the prevention of depression is needed. Europe is in a unique position to lead on double-duty actions to improve diet quality and mental health.