



THE FACTS ABOUT DIET

EATING WELL

- Good food is important in maintaining mental health, as well as physical health.
- In general, eating a nourishing, balanced diet helps to provide an overall sense of wellbeing.
- Eating well means having a wide variety of healthy foods including plenty of vegetables, fruit and cereals (like bread, rice and pasta), some lean meat, fish, poultry and/or alternatives as well as dairy products (milk, yoghurt, cheese) and plenty of water. It's a good idea to avoid fatty foods and foods with lots of sugar in them. Excessive dieting and over-exercising may put young people at risk of developing an eating disorder.

More than 99% of all children do not eat the recommended amount of vegetables. More than two-thirds of children do not follow the recommendation to limit their consumption of free sugars to less than 10% of total energy intake. (Australia's health 2018)

FOOD AND MOOD

- Current research reveals that diet and mental health are related. A poor diet is linked to negative mental health and a greater risk of depression, anxiety, and also impacts memory and learning.
- Eating well can increase mood, focus and self-esteem.



FOOD AND THE BRAIN

While genes and environment play an important role in brain development, diet is another factor that influences the health of the brain. This is partly because much of the brain's structure is derived directly from food. So it is easy to see why what we eat will have a dramatic effect on our thoughts and feelings. Just as the products that we put into a car affect its performance, so the engine of our thoughts and feelings is designed to work most effectively when certain nutritional requirements are met.

The brain is acutely sensitive to what we consume in our daily lives. To remain healthy, it needs different amounts of the following essential nutrients:

- Complex carbohydrates
- Essential fatty acids (EFAs)
- Amino acids
- Vitamins and Minerals
- Water



ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

Taking drugs or drinking alcohol has negative effects on the mind as well as the body. They can contribute to, or trigger, mental health problems in some young people. If a young person has an existing mental health problem using alcohol or drugs can cause more problems than either issue on its own. The safest level of drinking for teenagers is no drinking, especially for young people under 15 years of age. But if older teenagers do drink, parents or carers can minimise the risks by providing adult supervision and encouraging consumption within the adult guideline for low-risk drinking (two standard drinks in any one day).



CAFFEINE

Caffeine is a stimulant drug that acts on the brain and nervous system. In small doses, it can make you feel refreshed and focused. In large doses, you are likely to feel anxious and have difficulty sleeping. Like many other drugs, it is possible to develop a tolerance to caffeine, which means ever greater doses are needed to achieve the same effect. Caffeine intake should be investigated if a young person is showing symptoms of irritability, inability to sleep, interrupted sleep or stomach upsets. Energy drinks typically have more caffeine and sugar than soft drinks.



MYTHS ABOUT DIET

There are lots of myths about healthy food. Don't make food choices based on false beliefs. Suggestions include:

- Compare the prices of junk foods against the price of healthier food options to see that 'healthy' doesn't always mean 'expensive'.
- Experiment with different foods and recipes. You'll soon discover that a meal cooked with fresh ingredients always beats a limp burger or soggy chips.
- Try different 'fast' options like whole-wheat breakfast cereal, muesli, wholemeal bread, wholegrain muffins, fruit, yoghurt or pasta.
- Don't think that your diet has to be 'all or nothing'. Eating well doesn't mean you must be a health food freak. A good diet allows for treats occasionally.



AUSTRALIAN DIETARY GUIDELINES 1-3

1. To achieve and maintain a healthy weight be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet your energy needs.

- Children and adolescents should eat sufficient nutritious foods to grow and develop normally. They should be physically active every day and their growth should be checked regularly.

2. Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods every day from these five food groups.

- Plenty of vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans.
- Fruit.
- Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa and barley.
- Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds.
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives, mostly reduced fat.
- Drink plenty of water.

3. Limit intake of foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol.

- Limit intake of foods high in saturated fat such as many biscuits, cakes, pastries, pies, processed meats, commercial burgers, pizza, fried foods, potato chips, crisps and other savoury snacks.
- Replace high fat foods which contain predominantly saturated fats such as butter, cream, cooking margarine, coconut and palm oil with foods which contain predominantly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats such as oils, spreads, nut butters/pastes and avocado.
- Limit intake of foods and drinks containing added salt.
- Do not add salt to foods in cooking or at the table.
- Read labels to choose lower sodium options among similar foods.
- Limit intake of foods and drinks containing added sugars such as confectionary, sugar-sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, energy and sports drinks.
- If you choose to drink alcohol, limit intake. For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

There are some excellent resources out there which provide detailed information about the mental health benefits that certain foods provide. Here is a good place to start: [headspace, Eating well for a healthy headspace Fact Sheet](https://headspace.org.au/assets/download-cards/18d-Eat-well-headspace-fact-sheet-WEB.pdf), [Eating well for a healthy headspace Fact Sheet](https://headspace.org.au/assets/download-cards/18d-Eat-well-headspace-fact-sheet-WEB.pdf), <https://headspace.org.au/assets/download-cards/18d-Eat-well-headspace-fact-sheet-WEB.pdf>

This fact sheet has been adapted from the following sources:

- headspace, *Eating well for a healthy headspace Fact Sheet*, <https://headspace.org.au/assets/download-cards/18d-Eat-well-headspace-fact-sheet-WEB.pdf>
- Jacka et al 2010, *A associations between diet quality and depressed mood in adolescents: results from the Australian Healthy Neighbourhoods Study*, Aust & NZ J of Psychiatry, 44: 435-442, 2007
- headspace, *how does alcohol affect mental health*, <https://headspace.org.au/young-people/how-does-alcohol-affect-mental-health/>
- Australian Government, *Head to Health (2020) Food*, <https://headtohealth.gov.au/meaningful-life/physical-health/food>