- Convenience foods / Diet

FOODS THAT CAN AFFECT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

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IT'S long been understood that eating well helps us look and feel our best. What we're not always told is that good nutrition significantly affects our mental health too.



"You might be surprised to learn that the food we eat can actually have a big impact on our mood and mental health. We often focus on things like therapy and medication, but we don't always think about how our diet plays a role in how we feel.

Experts have found that eating a balanced diet is important for our mental well-being.

Registered dietician Omy Naidoo explained: "In South Africa, many people struggle with mental health issues, so it's important to understand how certain foods can help us feel better. Adding colourful fruits and vegetables to our meals not only gives us important nutrients, but it can also improve our mood."

It's not just about fruit and vegetables, though. Other foods can make a difference too. For example, foods with omega-3 fatty acids, such as fish, have been shown to reduce the risk of depression. And who would have thought that something as simple as dark chocolate could actually make us happier? It contains compounds that

can boost our mood and help us feel less stressed.

Our diet can even affect the way our gut and brain communicate with each other. The billions of tiny organisms in our gut, the gut microbiota, play a role in our mental health. Eating foods with probiotics, such as yoghurt or sauerkraut, and foods with lots of fibre, like whole grains, can help keep our gut healthy and improve our mental well-being.

"Staying hydrated is equally crucial for mental health. Dehydration can impair cognitive function and exacerbate stress. It's essential to maintain proper fluid intake throughout the day," said Naidoo.

"In the quest for better mental health, the adage 'you are what you eat' takes on a profound significance. Recent research has unveiled the impact of nutrition on psychological well-being, presenting an avenue for improved mental resilience and overall health. This exploration into the pivotal link between a healthy diet and mental health delves into the foods that can affect our emotional state and those that can empower us to nurture a more stable and positive mindset," he said.

As the world observes Mental Health Awareness Month, it's an opportune time to become aware of the ways in which our dietary choices can impact the complex landscape of our minds.

Foods that can affect your mood

Highly processed foods and those loaded with refined sugars can lead to rapid fluctuations in blood sugar levels. These spikes and crashes can result in mood swings, irritability, and even symptoms resembling anxiety and depression.

Caffeine and stimulants

While a morning cup of coffee can offer a temporary energy boost, excessive caffeine consumption can make you feel restless, and jittery and can even exacerbate anxiety or panic disorders.

Trans fats

Found in many fast foods, baked goods, and fried items, trans fats have been linked to an increased risk of depression and other related mental health issues.

Foods recommended by dieticians that support mental health

Omega-3 fatty acids

Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as fatty fish (salmon, mackerel), flaxseeds, and walnuts have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Antioxidant-rich foods

Fruits and vegetables, especially those with vibrant colours such as berries, spinach, and kale, are packed with antioxidants that protect brain cells from oxidative stress.

Protein

Consuming adequate amounts of protein from sources like poultry, beans and lentils ensures a steady supply of amino acids used by the brain to regulate mood and reduce stress.

"The relationship between a healthy diet and mental well-being cannot be understated. South Africa's growing mental health challenges make it imperative for individuals to make informed dietary choices," said Naidoo.

"By incorporating mood-boosting foods and avoiding those that may harm mental health, we can take significant steps toward achieving a healthier mind and a brighter future.

"While dietary changes alone may not be a panacea for mental health issues, they can certainly play a pivotal role in supporting overall well-being."