

# Seven ways to eat yourself out of depression

Feeling down in the dumps? Maybe it's your diet that needs a pick-up, says Michele Kirsch

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## **Eat a mind meal**

An ideal meal for mood has been devised for the mental health charity Mind by Amanda Geary, nutritional therapist and founder of the Food And Mood Project. It's a healthy feast of wheat-free pasta with pesto and oily fish, avocado and mixed-seed salad, and fruit and oatcakes for pudding. The pasta is wheat-free because wheat is a common culprit in food sensitivities that can cause fatigue and depression. The meal is rich in tryptophan, an amino acid that is converted in the body into the feel-good chemical serotonin. Slow-burn carbohydrates help facilitate the absorption of tryptophan, and the oily fish and seeds are high in omega 3 and 6 fats, which nourish the brain. For more information, visit [foodandmood.org](http://foodandmood.org).

## **Avoid trans fats and hydrogenated fats**

This means no processed foods, deep-fried food, ready-made cakes or biscuits: they all contain damaged fats that are bad for brain health. "If you eat too much of these damaged fats, they push out the good fats, such as omega 3s, from the brain," says Josephine Ng, a nutritional therapist at [brainnutrition.co.uk](http://brainnutrition.co.uk) and a specialist in mental health. "This makes the cell membranes more rigid and causes problems with the receiving of neurotransmitters." Also, use real butter instead of margarine - Ng says it's best to avoid processed food in general because it is nutrient-poor. If depression causes a poor appetite, make sure the food you do eat contains as many nutrients as possible.

## **Don't binge and don't go on a low-fat diet**

Research from the University of Texas shows that 80% of women who binge eat because they feel down go on to develop full-blown depression within five years - though there is a blurring of cause and effect. Dr Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, author of *Eating, Drinking And Over-Thinking* (Piatkus), says, "The lesson here is that the intersection of depression and unhealthy eating patterns is more toxic for women than either of these problems alone." The best way to avoid bingeing is to eat three meals a day to set up a regular pattern of hunger and satiety.

Strict low-fat diets, according to the Food And Mood Project, can lead to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.

## **Eat food rich in folate**

The link between folate (folic acid) deficiency and severe depression - as well as other psychiatric disorders - has been well documented. Most recently, a study in the Nutrition Review looked at the relationship between folate and depression. Low folate levels were detected in severely depressed people and, conversely, symptoms of depression are one of the main indicators of folate deficiency. They also found that people with low folate levels don't respond as well to SSRI-type antidepressants. Good dietary sources of folate include calves' liver, pinto, garbanzo, navy and kidney beans, lentils, asparagus and dark leafy greens. Overcooking the greens can destroy the folic acid, so lightly steamed is best.

### **Ditch caffeine and sugar**

These two seem to be the culprits in any pleasure-free detox regime, but if you are prone to depression there is a good reason for cutting down or eliminating them. "This is related to blood-sugar balance," says Josephine Ng, a nutritional therapist at [brainnutrition.co.uk](http://brainnutrition.co.uk), who specialises in mental health. "If you have lots of sugar or caffeine, you cause sudden surges and slumps in blood sugar, which then affect the supply to the brain. The brain needs a slow and steady supply of glucose to maintain stable moods." Reduce levels over a few weeks for minimum discomfort.

### **Eat more oily fish**

Essential fatty acids, in particular the omega 3 eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) found in oily fish, cod liver oil and eggs, can help. Dr Basant Puri, psychiatrist and co-author of *The Natural Way To Treat Depression* (Hodder), says diets low in EPA essentially starve the brain and weaken the phospholipid layer of the brain cells, which in turn inhibits the activity of feel-good neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. Puri treats depressed patients with EPA supplements, but he says you should still eat a diet high in EPA to prevent recurring episodes of depression.

### **Don't drown your sorrows**

Alcohol is a depressant with an initial paradoxical effect; you feel OK, then you feel really bad. The Royal College of Psychiatrists says it is bad medicine: "If we drink alcohol to relieve anxiety or depression, we will become even more depressed." Also, hangovers that make you wake up feeling jittery and ill will compound any underlying depression. Alcohol inhibits the absorption of many of the nutrients vital to brain health. Mild depressions can sometimes lift by stopping drinking, but if you increase alcohol use when depressed, you might find you need more alcohol to blot out bad feelings - and then you've got another problem.