

Diet, Mood and Behaviour of Children and Young People

The food we eat can greatly affect our mood and behaviour. If anything, the brain may be more sensitive to the food we eat than the heart. Our brain and bodies need at least 39 different things to function properly. We call these “**Nutrients**”. We can’t make them ourselves and have to get them from the food that we eat. Some young people skip meals. Many take sugary soft drinks. Most eat a diet is too low in vital nutrients. Changing any of these habits can lead to an improvement in mood.

How long does it take for a better diet to improve mood?

Taking regular meals and avoiding some food additives found in soft drinks, can lead to improvements in mood in a matter of minutes or hours. Choosing more nutritious foods takes weeks or months to have an effect. Of course, many things other than diet, affect the mood of children and young people, but getting the diet right can make a big difference for some.

What’s wrong with skipping meals?

The most common meal missed is breakfast. This can mean 12 or more hours with no food. Levels of sugar in the blood fall quite low making us feel grumpy and tired. A major reason for skipping meals is “*Dieting*” to control body weight. This just leads to overeating later on. Eating regularly helps the physical and mental wellbeing of all people, no matter what they weigh. Often, young people will take a sugary drink to give them a quick boost. The effect of this is very brief and can cause the level of sugar in the blood to “crash” an hour or so later.

Why are soft drinks such a problem?

It is important to drink regularly. Water is the best way to quench your thirst. Some young people value water less because it is free and often not branded or advertised as well as sugary soft drinks. Soft drinks containing added sugar, often also contain preservatives and food dyes known to affect mood and behaviour. A typical 500ml bottle of soft drink contains 10 to 12 teaspoons of sugar. Studies in animals suggest that high sugar intakes can be addictive. Large intakes of sugar may also lead to a fatty liver, which is very dangerous for long term health. In some soft drinks, caffeine is also added, making it even more likely that we will go back for another. Some “Energy drinks” contains a lot of caffeine. Finally if drinks sweetened with added sugar are taken instead of meals, the diet is likely to be short of important nutrients that affect the brain.

What foods are the most important to include?

There are several nutrients that diet surveys of young people in Scotland are short of. These include Iron, zinc, magnesium, selenium, fibre and omega 3 fats. All of these are needed for our brain to work properly. Without enough of these, our mood and concentration are affected. To get enough of these, it is important to include the following foods in the diet:

- Fish – at least twice a week
- Fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods – every day
- Red meat – twice a week (or beans, lentils and other pulses for vegetarians)

Is a healthy diet affordable?

If you are on a tight budget, **some** nutritious foods will still be affordable. For example, a can of oily fish, some vegetables, canned tomatoes, lean mince, porridge oats and lentils are all nourishing and relatively cheap. There is no doubt however, that making healthy and attractive choices is harder when money is tight. Many popular branded high fat and high sugar foods are on special offer. Some lean red meat, fresh fish, many fruits and nuts, and some vegetables can be very expensive. Calories from sugar are 100 times cheaper than calories from raspberries! Eating well on a budget needs a lot of thought and planning.

How do I know if I've got the balance right?

The best way to do this is to tick off all the foods your child eats from the picture of the “Eatwell Plate” below. There should be more ticks in the largest groups. Note that all drinks with added sugar belong to the very small, non-essential, purple group at the bottom.



I know what they should eat, but how do I get them to do it?

Knowing what diet can help improve the mood of young people is only half the battle of course. However, the more you model these eating habits yourself, the better chance there is that your children will also make improvements. Try to think about the knowledge, skills and confidence your child has in shopping preparing and cooking their own food. By the time young people leave home, it is important that they have at least half a dozen quick, tasty and affordable meals that they can confidently make, more quickly and cheaply than ordering a take-away! Also, when young people are involved in preparing meals, they are more likely to accept them.