



Upper Arlington Preventative Primary Care

Influence of Diet on Depression and Anxiety

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Is it possible that by improving the food choices you make every day – improving your overall diet – you could have a positive influence on your mental state? Although it may seem like that is a difficult connection to make, there have been a number of well done scientific studies through the years that provide convincing evidence that your daily food choices can directly influence your risk for both anxiety and depressive-like symptoms.

We all understand there is an obvious and clear connection between your daily food choices and your physical health. Accordingly, it seems only natural to believe that a connection must exist between diet and your psychological health; the body is after all one single interconnected unit. And there is a “stomach to brain” connection. Further, the results that link diet to mood, levels of anxiety, and mental state have been confirmed to be independent of level of education, your socioeconomic standing, and other potential health risk factors.

Recently, the first large scale controlled clinical-medical study to examine the link between diet quality and depression has provided further strong support for the stomach to brain connection. An Australian study, published in January 2017, enrolled people who had medically diagnosed moderate to severe depression and also poor quality diets at the start of the study, and randomized them into two groups:

- 1.) A diet group.** This experimental group received personalized nutrition counseling for the entire twelve week study period on how to follow a slightly modified Mediterranean-style diet. Individuals received advice on eating whole grains, vegetables of all kinds, all varieties of fruits, legumes, low-fat and unsweetened dairy foods, all varieties of nuts, fish, lean red meats, and olive oil. Additionally they were strongly encouraged to reduce processed grains, sweets of any kind, fried and/or fast foods, processed meats, and sugary drinks. Finally they were told to only consume moderate amounts of alcohol.
- 2.) A social support (control) group.** This experimental group discussed only non-diet related neutral topics such as sports and music with a conversation facilitator. They also engaged in board games and other activities, over the same twelve week study time frame.

Following the twelve week study, when compared with the social support group, the diet group had a significantly greater reduction in both depressive symptoms and anxiety-related episodes. This result was demonstrated even with variables such as weight loss taken into account. Additionally, more participants in the diet group (32 percent versus 8 percent) achieved depression remission.

These encouraging findings—which come out of the new field known as Nutritional Psychiatry—provide preliminary evidence for dietary improvements as an “efficacious treatment strategy” for symptoms of both depression and anxiety.

Finally, as a very positive bonus, improving diet will almost certainly improve many typical medical issues – elevated cholesterol, high blood pressure, elevated triglycerides, and overweight/obesity - that often occur when individuals suffer from depression.