

# The Food-Mood Connection

## How to eat right to stay alert throughout the day

By Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy

**D**o you often feel great in the morning, but after lunch are irritable and ready to take a nap? Imagine the power of knowing exactly what you should eat to alleviate anxiety or bolster your energy.

Nutritional neuroscience has found that what and when we eat can alter brain chemistry, and that our feelings also strongly influence our food choices. Serotonin is the brain's relaxing neurotransmitter, and dopamine and norepinephrine produce alertness. Eating foods with the right mix of these elements can contribute to health and optimal performance, while the wrong choices can lead to fatigue, depression and a weakened immune system.

Here are 10 ways to use food to feel better throughout the day:

1. Eat a balanced breakfast. Focus on a mix of low-fat protein, such as yogurt, and complex carbohydrates, such as whole grain breads. This will boost your concentration and provide a steady flow of energy.
2. Stay alert with a protein-rich lunch. Eating protein, which encourages the production of dopamine and norepinephrine, is the best way to boost alertness. Choose three to four ounces of lean beef, poultry (without the skin), fish, low-fat milk products, beans, nuts or soy products.
3. Use brain-friendly carbohydrates to calm you down. Carbohydrates boost the production of serotonin, and therefore help you feel calm. Focus on complex carbohydrates, such as brown rice and whole grain breads. To experience the maximum effect, it is important to eat carbohydrates alone, or at least without protein.
4. Graze. Eat small amounts throughout the day to keep your energy levels and



mood more constant. Avoid large meals rich in saturated fat and/or simple carbohydrates, which will cause an energy slump. For snacks, eat cottage cheese with fruit, low-fat cheese and crackers, pretzels or popcorn.

5. Focus on smart fats. A small amount of omega-3 fatty acids, found in cold water fish, walnuts and eggs, will keep you feeling energized and fuller longer. These healthy fats lower the level of potentially harmful fats, such as cholesterol, in the blood.

6. Avoid the sugar blues. Stay away from the highly refined sugars found in candy, syrups and packaged baked goods. They enter the bloodstream quickly, causing the blood sugar roller coaster that can affect mood and concentration.

7. Don't eat too little. Eating too little, or skipping meals, can cause blood glucose levels to drop, which leads to irritability and poor concentration. Most active

people can consume 2,000 to 2,400 calories per day and still maintain their weight.

8. Beware of food sensitivities. The food-mood effect can occur or be exacerbated by a food sensitivity, as in celiac disease and lactose intolerance; by a metabolic disease, such as diabetes and ADHD; or be manifested in skin conditions, such as eczema or hives. If you have severe reactions to certain foods, eliminate their intake and consult your physician.

9. Make water your drink of choice. Drink a minimum of eight eight-ounce glasses of water a day. Water can help control your appetite and works as a cleansing agent for your body. Watch your intake of alcohol, which can cause dehydration, and coffee, which can produce feelings of anxiety.

10. Don't eat two or three hours before going to bed. If you must have a bedtime snack, eat a tryptophan-containing food such as a banana, or a carbohydrate-rich snack like dry cereal. Avoid protein for several hours before bedtime or you may experience difficulty falling asleep.

Plan your meals according to your energy needs. Keep a food diary so you can learn your negative eating patterns and which triggers to avoid. Ask yourself what is prompting you to eat, your appetite or your feelings? When it comes to mental attitude, you truly are what you eat. **TNI**

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