

# Eating a Balanced Diet

Various nutrients have been linked to reducing symptoms of mental disorders including depression and anxiety. The nutrients in a well-rounded diet are essential for creating mood-altering neurotransmitters and maintaining the health of the brain to help alleviate symptoms, while highly -processed foods have been shown to worsen them.



## Why eating healthy matters

Dehydration, caffeine, excessive sugar, and lack of nutrition can contribute to jitters, lightheadedness, weakness, lack of focus, and racing heart. When you're feeling down, you may assume these symptoms are caused by stress or poor mental health, rather than understanding they are tied to your food habits. You may end up feeling even more discouraged when self-care methods aren't helping you feel better. What you may need on some of those days is simply a nutrient-rich meal, to drink some water, or to cut back on caffeine or sugar. It is important to note, however, that more nutritious or less processed meals may be more challenging to access for some folks. To learn about services and programs that help address this, please see our list of resources at the end of this guide.

## Lack of appetite and thirst

Depression has been linked to lack of appetite and skipping meals. If you're in this position, you're not alone. It's possible a lack of appetite is driven by feeling nauseous, having too much on your mind, or being overly sedentary. Here are some tips to help kickstart your cravings.



### **Eat by the clock:**

Try scheduling small meals or snacks every two to three hours, rather than waiting for hunger to kick in. This method will help recover your hunger signals and make sure you're getting enough nutrients in the meantime.

### **Get moving:**

If your low appetite is accompanied by a sedentary lifestyle, you may not be getting enough exercise in order to stimulate your appetite. Try going for a walk in the early afternoon or incorporating another type of movement.

### **Always have water:**

Keeping a reusable water bottle or a glass of water in your space during the day can serve as a reminder to drink more. It's harder to avoid drinking water when you've removed any effort it would take to go get a new cup.

## Requires too much effort ?

Cooking can be time-consuming and tiring, and it is understandable if this has hindered you from eating enough to feel nourished. Sadly, insufficient nutrients can worsen your mood by draining your energy. You can support your mental health by prioritizing practices which will make eating as simple as possible on days it's difficult to manage.

### **Cook in larger quantities:**

If you struggle finding the energy to cook both lunch and dinner, try cooking in larger quantities when you do have the energy. Save the rest in the freezer or fridge for later. Eating leftovers from a well-balanced meal is likely to give you more nutrients than a meal replacement snack and is relatively low maintenance.

### **Start simple:**

Cooking low-processed meals doesn't have to be fancy. Check out this website for a few ideas for simple meal and side-dish ideas that don't require any cooking experience. Cheffing up doesn't have to be scary.

### **Eat smaller, more frequent meals and snacks:**

Cooking larger meals may feel like too tiring a task on some days. Interweaving high-protein snacks such as nuts, protein shakes, granola and Greek yogurt, or eggs in between smaller meals is a good option for fueling your body when prepping an entire balanced meal doesn't feel possible.



## Eating too much

When we accidentally overeat, we are often consuming too much of the food that gives us short-term energy without the long-term benefits. This type of consumption can increase risk of other health problems like heart disease and diabetes. Here are some tips to reduce thought-patterns and habits you may have which can contribute to overeating.

**Try not to eat for comfort:** Dealing with feeling upset, bored, stressed, sad, angry, or lonely by eating provides very short-term relief. If this is your instinct, try to avoid eating when you're feeling down and not hungry by replacing it with another stress-relieving activity (e.g., walking, calling a friend, writing down your thoughts, reading, etc.)

**Listen to your body:** Focus on how it feels when you begin to get full and when you start to feel hungry again. If your body is signalling that you are full, you can stop eating and save the leftovers, if possible. While you should try to not create excess food waste, eating the extra when you're really full is not a better option. You can always learn to make less next time.

**Avoid distracted eating:** Many of us eat mindlessly when watching TV or sitting at a computer. Try to make your eating behaviours intentional, by avoiding the habit of picking up a snack when you are going to be eating it mindlessly.



# Foods to incorporate

**Disclaimer:** This is a limited list of examples. There are many other foods which can fulfill the same nutritional needs. Not eating the foods included here does not indicate you are missing important food groups if you are eating a balanced diet, whether due to accessibility, lifestyle, culture, or personal choice.

Kinds of food incorporate	Examples
<p><b>Whole grains</b></p> 	<p>Try and incorporate whole grains at each meal.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brown rice</li> <li>• Barley</li> <li>• Oats (oatmeal)</li> <li>• Quinoa</li> <li>• Whole grain flour products</li> </ul>
<p><b>Fruits (frozen or fresh)</b></p> 	<p>Add in fruits with meals and/or snack daily.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homemade smoothies</li> <li>• Add fruit into salad</li> <li>• A snack between meals</li> </ul>
<p><b>Vegetables (frozen or fresh)</b></p> 	<p>Incorporate vegetables at lunch and dinner (raw vegetables are great too!). Eat a variety of colours and types (dark green, yellow/orange, red, blue/purple)</p>
<p><b>Proteins</b></p> 	<p>A quarter of your plate should be made up of protein(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fish like Salmon, Tuna, Trout, Cod, Mackerel, Sardines or Anchovies</li> <li>• Chicken</li> <li>• Turkey</li> <li>• Nuts and seeds</li> <li>• Beans, peas, lentils</li> </ul>

## Foods to limit

**Caffeine:** Although you may love the boost that comes from a coffee or an energy drink, they come at the cost of an energy-crash. Consuming caffeine occasionally is okay, but it shouldn't be your daily go-to for energy.

If you're finding you're too exhausted mid-day and require a second cup of coffee to wake yourself back up, it may be time to consider reevaluating your sleep habits. It is best to avoid caffeine in the evening, as it can disrupt how fast you fall asleep and the overall quality of your sleep, making it more likely you'll be tired when you wake up.

**High sugar foods:** Similar to caffeine, high sugar foods give you a short burst of energy, but are later accompanied by an energy low, making you feel drained. Try limiting sweets and desserts to two servings a week or for special occasions and reduce the high sugar snacks you may be eating without realizing.

- Store bought dried fruits with added sugar
- Fruit snacks with corn syrup
- Store bought granola bars with added sugar
- Candy and pastries
- Soft drinks or sweetened fruit juice

**Carbohydrates:** Products like white flour, white pasta, , and white bread, are lower in fibre than the whole-grain alternatives Choose whole-grain pasta, bread or rice or other whole-grain options such as; quinoa, barley or oats where possible to ensure you are getting enough fibre.

**Salt:** Salt in moderation isn't harmful, but it's a good idea to limit processed, packaged, and fast foods that typically contain high amounts of salt. These products can make you feel bloated and sick and contribute to other health issues in the long run. Additionally, when flavouring food at home, opt for spices, herbs, garlic and onions when possible.

**Butter:** Opt for olive, peanut, or avocado oil to reduce your intake of saturated fats from butter.

