



# Food and mental health

Some studies suggest that what we eat and drink can affect how we feel. But it can be difficult to know what to eat, especially when healthier foods can be more expensive. And it can be hard to think about our diet when we're struggling with our mental wellbeing.

If you want to contact us with any feedback, email [contact@mind.org.uk](mailto:contact@mind.org.uk).

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### Eating problems

If thinking about what and when to eat feels like it's taking over your life, this could be an eating problem. Eating problems can be about difficult experiences and painful feelings, as well as food.

See our pages on [eating problems](#) for more information, including ways to get help and tips for how to cope.

# How can food and drink affect how I feel?

We all react differently to the things in our diet. But there are some foods and drinks that may affect how we feel, in different ways. This section talks about food and drink that might affect how you feel and has some ideas for how to manage this.

These tips may help some of us think about what to eat and drink. But they are only a guide. Some of us may find them less helpful or achievable, especially when we are feeling unwell – and that's ok.

Our section on how to manage your diet when you're unwell (page 5) has some tips that might also help.

## **If you are struggling to afford food**

Many of us are struggling with money right now. This might affect how much food we can buy, and what kind of food – especially when healthier foods can be more expensive.

If you can't afford the food you need, help is out there. Visit our pages on [money and mental health](#) to find out more about what support might be available to you.

## **Blood sugar levels**

If your blood sugar is lower than usual, you might feel tired, irritable or depressed. Eating regularly, and eating foods that release energy slowly, can help to keep your sugar levels steady.

Different people may have different reactions to the same foods. But generally, foods like wholegrain bread and cereal, nuts, seeds, brown pasta and brown rice release energy more slowly than foods like white bread, crisps, white pasta and white rice.

**If you have diabetes, speak to your GP or another healthcare professional before making any changes to your diet that could affect your blood sugar levels.**

Diabetes UK has more information about the link between [diabetes and mental health](#).

## **Drinking fluids**

If you live with a mental health problem, you may not have the energy or motivation to drink lots of fluids. But if you become dehydrated, this can make it harder to concentrate or think clearly.

Water, tea, coffee, juices and smoothies can all help you feel hydrated. But some of these may also contain caffeine or sugar, which could affect how you feel for different reasons.

It may help to try and track your fluid intake, such as by writing it down or with a reminder on your phone.

## Fruits and vegetables

Eating different fruits and vegetables can add a good range of nutrients to your diet. These nutrients help to keep us mentally and physically healthy.

Fresh fruit and vegetables can sometimes be expensive and more difficult to prepare. Frozen, tinned, dried and juiced fruits and vegetables all count towards your 5 a day too, if you want a cheaper or easier alternative.

The [NHS](#) website has more ideas for getting your 5 a day.

## Protein

Diets higher in protein can support your mental health. Protein contains chemicals called amino acids, which your brain needs to produce chemicals called neurotransmitters. These help to regulate your thoughts and feelings.

You can find protein in foods like:

- Legumes (peas, beans and lentils)
- Nuts and seeds
- Milk
- Fish
- Eggs
- Cheese
- Lean meat
- Soya products

If you're finding it difficult to get enough protein in your diet, you could try adding some grated cheese to a meal, or having a glass of milk. Or you can eat packets of nuts or seeds.

## Caffeine

Caffeine is in tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and other energy drinks. It is a stimulant. This means it can give you a quick burst of energy.

But it might also:

- Make you feel anxious and depressed
- Disturb your sleep, especially if you have it just before bed
- Give you withdrawal symptoms like feeling irritable or depressed, if you suddenly stop having it

If you think caffeine is affecting your mood, you could try to slowly reduce how much caffeine you have. For example, you could switch between having a caffeinated drink and a decaf version.

## Healthy fats

Your brain needs certain fatty acids, such as omega-3 and omega-6, to keep it working well. You can find healthy fats in:

- Nuts and seeds
- Oily fish, such as sardines and mackerel (these are cheaper if you buy them tinned in the supermarket)
- Avocados

We know that it can be challenging to eat well when we're feeling low, and some healthier fats can be more expensive, so it is okay if you want to try these changes but you're unable to at the moment.

## Foods for good gut health

Sometimes your gut can reflect your mood. If you're stressed or anxious this can make your gut slow down or speed up. This can lead to problems with digestion, such as feeling bloated or constipated. Or you may not feel as hungry as usual.

If you're feeling stressed and you think it is affecting your gut, you could try some [relaxation techniques](#) or breathing exercises.

You can also try eating more foods that support healthy digestion. For example, fruits, vegetables and wholegrains, and pulses (such as tinned or dried beans, peas and lentils). Probiotics such as live yoghurt, tempeh and kimchi are also good for gut health.

## Alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol can disrupt chemicals in the brain that are important for good mental health.

Some of us with mental health problems may depend on alcohol to help with feelings that we struggle to deal with in other ways. If you use alcohol in this way, you may be

experiencing addiction. See our pages on [recreational drug and alcohol addiction](#) to find support.

## Food intolerances and allergies

If you have a food intolerance or allergy, this might affect you physically and mentally. For example, this may be an intolerance or allergy to wheat, dairy or yeast.

If you're concerned about this, you could talk to a health professional such as a dietician and ask if they can help you investigate your tolerances safely. Visit the NHS website to find out more about [food intolerances](#) and [food allergies](#). [Allergy UK](#) also has advice and support for people affected by allergies.

## How can medication and food interact?

Some foods can be dangerous to eat if you're taking certain medications. They might stop a medication from working as well as it should, or may cause side effects.

You also may need to take some medications before or after you eat or drink. Others may increase or reduce your appetite.

Before prescribing you any medication, your doctor should explain any possible risks or side effects. This is to help you decide whether you want to take it.

You can find more information about your medication in the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) that comes with it. You can download PILs for many mental health drugs from our [A-Z list of psychiatric medication](#).

If you are unsure or worried about what foods and drinks to avoid with your medication, you can speak to your GP or local pharmacy.

## How can I manage my diet when I am unwell?

It can be difficult to eat well when we have poor mental health. These are some tips which might help if you are struggling.

**Remember: it's ok to choose more convenient foods if this is what feels possible right now.**

## Write down how food is making you feel

If you feel able to, write down what you eat and make notes about how you're feeling. Over time you might work out how particular foods can:

- Make you feel worse, or better
- Keep you awake or give you more energy
- Affect your sleep

## Plan ahead

When you're feeling well and have more energy, it can be helpful to plan ahead for times when you don't feel well. Here are some ideas:

- **Try making some extra meals to store.** You could make enough to last for several days and freeze them in portions to heat up at times when you don't feel like cooking.
- **Write a list of easy, affordable meals** to make when you're not feeling well. This could include meals like beans on toast or jacket potatoes.
- **Stock up on some staple ingredients if you can.** This could include cheaper things that are long-life or tinned. Or you could buy things that you can freeze to use later. These foods will last longer and could save you money.
- **Get food shopping delivered to your home.** This can save time, but can also be helpful if you don't feel up to leaving the home or being in a supermarket.

## Try to accept help from others

When we're not feeling well, we may sometimes get offers of help from other people in our lives.

If you are struggling and someone offers you help, you could suggest that:

- They help with practical things, such as shopping or ordering food
- You plan, cook and eat a meal together, to make the process feel less daunting

## Try to make the food preparation process easier

When we're feeling unwell, it can take a lot of energy to prepare food or to clean up afterwards. These tips may help:

- **Wash up as you go.** Try washing up bit by bit as you are preparing food. This might help you feel less overwhelmed by the amount of washing up to do after

you've finished preparing your meal. If you're really struggling with washing up and it's stopping you from eating what you need to, it might help to try using disposable plates and kitchen towels for a short while.

- **Rinse dishes before washing them.** This can stop food from sticking to them and make them easier to wash up.
- **Make food all in one pot or dish.** Some recipe websites or books have one-pot or one-tin recipes. These are useful for reducing the amount of equipment you need to use and clean.
- **Try using pre-chopped or frozen fruits and vegetables.** This can reduce the amount of food preparation you have to do. Frozen fruits and vegetables are also often cheaper than fresh.

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To be revised in 2026

References are available on request.