The Delicious Link: Nutrition and Depression

Anyone who has even felt a rush of pleasure after biting into a delicious chocolate knows that what you eat and how you feel are connected. However, this link may reflect more than the simple enjoyment of the pleasures of dessert. There is an association between proper nutrition and depression. And, as we age, the importance of eating well becomes more and more significant.

Depression
As people age, a number of factors can contribute to depression. Older adults may experience an increase in physical and mental ailments, a decrease in mobility, and they may lose their spouse or other contemporaries. These losses can leave older adults living alone and feeling isolated. These conditions may often lead to a “reactive” type of depression, in which an individual’s down mood can be due to grief over loss of loved ones, loss of physical ability and health, and loss of a former sense of self, brought on by retirement or role changes. This has the potential to develop into a clinical depression, especially when combined with other risk factors such as family history of depression or an imbalance of brain chemicals.

Nutrition
The same conditions that contribute to depression can also contribute to poor nutrition. As physical abilities such as chewing, sense of taste, and hand-eye coordination decline, so does a person’s ability and desire to prepare and eat healthy meals. The decline of mental abilities such as concentration and memory may deter older adults from eating regularly or following a recipe. A decrease in mobility can prevent older adults from maneuvering around the kitchen and making trips to the grocery store. With the loss of a spouse or companion, older adults can find themselves living alone and not wanting to “just cook for one”. Finally, as a result of retirement or the loss of a spouse, household income can be drastically reduced, leaving an older individual with little money to buy healthy food.

The Link between Nutrition and Depression
So, how do poor nutrition and depression relate to each other, aside from having many of the same origins? Studies show that older adults with poor eating habits are more vulnerable to depression. It has been shown that low levels of the nutrients folate, zinc, B-6 and B-12 can lead to an increased risk of depression. And conversely, those who are clinically depressed often do not maintain a nutritionally balanced diet, either by eating too much or too little. Thus, poor nutrition can lead to depressive symptoms, and vice versa, resulting in a downward spiral of increasing depression and decreasing nutrition.

Proper nutrition and eating habits can help older adults to improve their general health and quality of life, and in turn ward off some of the physical and mental ailments associated with a higher risk of depression.
Improve your nutrition and well-being

- Try to eat from each of the food groups- fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, protein.
- Eat a lot of color- fruits and vegetables come in a rainbow of colors. By eating lots of colorful fruits and vegetables, you will get a range of important vitamins and minerals.
- Make sure you get enough:
  - **Folate.** Sources include: fortified breakfast cereals, all types of beans, liver, asparagus, oatmeal, spinach, romaine lettuce and fortified orange juice. Folate is also important for building new cells.
  - **Vitamin B-12.** Sources include: organ meats, clams and oysters, eggs, meats and poultry, fish, cheeses and dry milk. Getting enough Vitamin B can also help to ward off anemia and is important for metabolism and creating new blood cells.
  - **Vitamin B-6.** Sources include: white meats (poultry, fish, pork), bananas and whole grains. Vitamin B-6 is also helpful for maintaining mental sharpness and general health.
  - **Zinc.** Sources include: red and white meat, shellfish, and wheat germ. Zinc also helps boost immunity, brain function, and healing.

Overcome some of your healthy eating “obstacles”

- **If you have trouble chewing**, choose softer versions of your favorite healthy food. Try applesauce instead of apples, soft breads instead of crusty rolls, and well-simmered beef stew instead of tougher cuts of meat.
- **If your sense of taste has diminished**, try spicing food up with garlic, curry, herbs, or different types of pepper. Try to avoid using too much salt, especially if you have high blood pressure.
- **If you have trouble cooking and moving around the kitchen**, consider purchasing frozen dinners or contacting Meals-on-Wheels at (800) 677-1116. If you have trouble getting to the grocery store, find a grocery store that delivers or look into finding a home health aide to do your shopping for you. To find a home health aide, look in the yellow pages under “home health services”
- **If money is an issue**, try the following tips: 1) Buy frozen produce instead of fresh. Frozen foods maintain all their nutrients but are a fraction of the cost. 2) Look for “seconds” at the store. These are fruits and vegetables that are still fresh, but can’t be sold at full price because of cosmetic defects. 3) Join a local senior center. Many day programs at
community senior centers offer a nutritionally balanced meal at no charge.

- **As people age, their sense of thirst diminishes.** Try to drink 8 8-ounce glasses of water, juice, or herbal tea every day.

And don’t forget to bite into that delicious chocolate once in a while!


