



Folic acid doesn't often exist enough in our diets, so adding dark green, leafy vegetables is key to offset the deficiency.



Switching to plant-based meals with grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables improves mental health and increases energy and productivity.

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REDUCING FOODS

BY DEBRA STEVKO MILLER

Let's face it. The last few years have caused a whirlwind of emotions about a plethora of concerns from the coronavirus to natural disasters, from the economy to political instability.

"There's been a tremendous increase in anxiety; it's skyrocketed," said Dr. David C. Leopold, DABFM, DABOIM, of Hackensack Meridian Health. "It comes up very frequently in patient encounters even if it's not the main thing for which I'm seeing a patient."

To counteract anxiety as a reaction to stress, integrating specific foods containing antioxidants, phytochemicals and essential vitamins/minerals into your diet can help reduce the worry.

"We get a lot more requests now for ways to deal with increased stress, anxiety, mental health issues, depression," said Leopold, who practices integrative health and medicine. "I'm an advocate for conventional care, but often that's not enough in the context of a diet that's not optimized."

The Standard American Diet (SAD) of fried cuisine, processed meats, refined sugar, saturated fats and not enough

fiber or fruits and vegetables contributes to bloating, lethargy and feeling sleepy. Switching to plant-based meals and cold-water fish, whole grains, nuts, seeds, olive and avocado oils, and quality red meat improves mental health with the added benefit of increased energy and productivity, according to Leopold.

"Most people have a hard time drawing a line between what they eat and how they feel. It's a matter of a mind shift," he said. "Yes, there's a transition period, but it's doable. Find something enjoyable. It's not something that can't be done by any means."

Munch on carrot sticks and hummus rather than French fries. Drink seltzer with lime juice rather than soda. Try Greek yogurt with fresh fruit and skip the ice cream. Thousands of his patients are eating healthier and, ultimately, feeling better.

"It's about patient empowerment," he said. "One of the things you can really control is what goes into your body. You are what you eat. If you put garbage in, then your body has a lot of challenges to make a high-quality product."

Alyssa Luning, a registered dietitian community educator with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in Hamilton, noted that folate, or folic acid, is also important.

"It's common that people don't get enough folic acid in their diet because it comes from primarily dark green, leafy vegetables," Luning said. "A deficiency can really contribute to depressed moods and the problems with which serotonin works within your brain. People do not think about how their diet can influence their anxiety."

While folate can be found as B9 in multivitamins, our body absorbs it better naturally through legumes, like avocados, chickpeas, beans and lentils — the "heavy hitters" as Luning refers to them. Brussels sprouts, broccoli, spinach, mustard greens, mango, lettuce, asparagus and black-eyed peas also top the list.

Suggested Leopold: "If you do nothing else, pay attention to what you are eating and noting how you feel. When people change what they eat, they get better, they feel better." ♦