

# Wellness Wednesday



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## The Foods To Eat For Better Mental Health

The ingredients to eat (and those to avoid) when you're trying to get a handle on stress.

Health experts warn that a lingering effect of the coronavirus pandemic could be a mental health crisis. While therapy and medications for stress and anxiety are often necessary, the foods you eat can also play a role in your well-being.

An American Psychiatric Association poll released in March found that 36% of Americans felt the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic was having a serious impact on their mental health. People were most worried about their finances, the risk of themselves or a family member contracting the virus, and the possibility of becoming seriously ill or dying.

All the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic has increased stress and anxiety, leading to a greater demand for prescriptions for (and some shortages of) antidepressant, anti-anxiety and anti-insomnia medications.



While it's dangerous to treat food as a substitute for medicine, eating for your brain health can help ease the impact of anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder, said Uma Naidoo, a nutritional psychiatrist and author of the new book "This Is Your Brain on Food."

"During COVID-19 and whatever lies beyond this time, we anticipate a significant surge of these disorders, specifically anxiety, depression and stress," she told HuffPost. "So food becomes one mechanism [to feel better], since we all have to eat."

People already focus their diets on other health goals, such as weight loss or heart health. As the coronavirus continues to upend our lives, eating for mental health can be just as important.

## The gut-brain connection

The gut has been called the "second brain." And we recognize the link between the two even if we don't realize it: You may feel "butterflies in your stomach" when you're nervous or "go with your gut" when you make an important decision.

Naidoo said the two are connected physically and biochemically via the gut-brain axis, the complex communications network that links the emotional and cognitive centers of the brain with intestinal functions.

The basis of the “gut-brain romance,” as Naidoo writes in her book, is the vagus nerve, a central part of the nervous system that controls mood, immune response, digestion and other bodily functions. It’s also a main connector of the brain and the gastrointestinal tract. Stress can inhibit the vagus nerve, impacting gut microbiota and upsetting gastrointestinal conditions.

The central nervous system also produces dopamine, serotonin and other chemicals that regulate mood and process thought and emotion. Serotonin deficiency, in particular, can cause anxiety and depression, and about 90% of serotonin receptors are found in the gut.

The gut-brain connection explains why what we eat affects our mental health. “It’s not just as glib as you are what you eat, but that specific foods have either a positive effect or a negative effect,” Naidoo said.

Deanna Minich, an Institute for Functional Medicine certified practitioner and functional medicine nutritionist, also emphasizes the importance of diet to control inflammation in the body. “Having a healthy, anti-inflammatory diet reduces the other dysfunctional and even inflammatory ‘noise’ in the body that can be at the root cause for symptoms or disease,” she explained.

## Foods that can aid mental health

Most of the key nutrients needed for brain and gut health are found naturally in foods, so it’s usually best to choose foods over supplements, Minich said. But dietary supplements can fill in any nutrient gaps — just talk to a health professional first.

For the best results, a nutritionist can tailor your diet to your individual mental health needs. But Naidoo said there are three categories of foods that everyone needs more of to help reduce stress and anxiety.

### 1. Prebiotics and probiotics

Prebiotics are non-digestible components naturally found in the gut that promote the growth of good bacteria, while probiotics are the live good bacteria in the gut, according to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

“Prebiotic and probiotic food sources are a very good basis to start regulating your gut health and therefore your mental health,” Naidoo said.

Yogurt with active cultures is a top source of probiotics, along with fermented foods like miso, kimchi and kombucha. Sauerkraut, buttermilk and some cheeses, such as cheddar, mozzarella and Gouda, are other good sources. Prebiotic-rich foods include beans, legumes, oats, garlic, onions, berries and bananas.



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## 2. Fruits and vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain valuable prebiotics, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. For example, magnesium, found in avocados, nuts and salmon, and vitamin C, found in broccoli, oranges and kale, can help reduce anxiety.

Fruits and vegetables are also natural sources of fiber, which can relieve anxiety. But only about 10% of American adults consume the recommended 1.5 to 2 cups of fruit and 2 to 3 cups of vegetables a day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“They’re really good food for your gut bacteria,” Naidoo said. “When your good gut bacteria is fed by these nutrients, they thrive. And by thriving, they help your mood, help you feel better so that your chances of inflammation are lower.”

## 3. Spices

Spices are calorie-free and flavorful, and their impact on brain and gut health is often overlooked. One of the best spice combos is turmeric with a pinch of black pepper, Naidoo said. Black pepper activates the curcumin compound in turmeric, which has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits.

“Putting turmeric in a shake, a smoothie or soup is an easy way to go,” she said. “You really only need a quarter teaspoon a day with a pinch of black pepper, and it targets anxiety, depression and many other conditions.”

Dried oregano, curry powder, chili powder and cumin seed are other spices with high antioxidant levels.

## Foods that can hurt mental health

Fried foods, processed foods, trans fats, nitrates and foods high in salt, saturated fat and refined sugars can worsen depression, anxiety and stress.

“If you’re eating processed foods and fast foods every day, that’s basically making the bad gut bacteria thrive, and that’s when you start to run into problems with inflammation,” Naidoo explained.

Too much caffeine and alcohol may also make you feel worse mentally but are usually OK in moderation. Drinking 400 mg per day or less of coffee shouldn’t have an impact on anxiety, Naidoo said.

People respond to alcohol intake differently, but generally, four drinks a day for men and three for women is considered heavy drinking.



## How to start eating for your mental health

To shift your diet with mental health in mind, Naidoo suggests starting small. Trying to change too much too fast can be overwhelming and diminish results. "Slow and steady change over time will start to build that healthy gut and basically start to build on the healthy nutrients that are good for your brain," she said.

Begin with a diet self-check. Write down what you ate over the past 24 to 48 hours, circle the foods that are unhealthy, and then decide on one simple change you can make. You don't necessarily have to give up some of your favorite less-than-healthy foods, though.

"I'm a big believer in not only nutritious food, but delicious food," Naidoo said. "If you happen to be an ice cream person, that's completely fine. Have it on your treat day. I don't call it a cheat day because that's a negative connotation. It's a treat — enjoy it and move on."

How long the changes will take to make you feel better depends, Minich said. It could be anywhere from a few hours to a few days or months.

Taking steps to improve your diet for your mental health is especially important today, she said, as the effects of the pandemic will persist. Concerns over jobs, finances, food insecurity, gaps in children's education and more will take a toll.

"A healthy diet can help mitigate or buffer one from these types of effects as it sets the stage for a beneficial gut microbiome and less inflammation, both of which are tied to mood, anxiety, depression and even sleep," Minich said.

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# TURMERIC GOLDEN MILK POPSICLES



84 Calories | *PREP TIME: 5 mins* | *FREEZE TIME: 5 HRS* | *TOTAL TIME: 5 HOURS 5 mins*  
*YIELD: 6 Servings* | *COURSE: Snack, Dessert* | *CUISINE: American*

## INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups light canned coconut milk
- 3 tbsp honey
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1/8 tsp freshly ground black pepper

Turmeric Golden Milk is all the rave these days! So why not enjoy them frozen all year long. Turmeric is an anti-inflammatory, and is said to help boost the immune system, so not only are they a yummy treat, it's also a great way to get the benefits of Turmeric.

## TIPS:

Add a pumpkin spice blend and some vanilla bean or liquid to ramp up that fall pumpkin taste.

## Nutrition Information

Serving: 1 popsicle, Calories: 84 kcal, Carbohydrates: 10 g, Protein: 0.1 g, Fat: 4.5 g, Saturated Fat: 4 g, Sodium: 5.5 mg, Fiber: 0.1 g, Sugar: 8.5 g  
Source: [Skinnytaste.com](http://Skinnytaste.com)





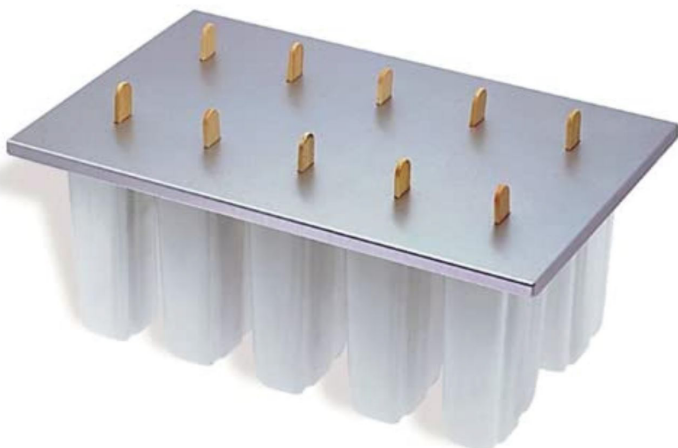
## INSTRUCTIONS



### How to make:

- 1.) Place all the ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. Strain.
- 2.) Pour the mixture into popsicle molds and freeze 1 hour.
- 3.) Insert the sticks and freeze until solid, about 4 hours more.

Molds are available on Amazon for as low as \$12.71



## FEATURED EXERCISE

Show your booty some (tough) love with these serious strengthening moves.

### Dumbbell Side Lunge

#### How to Do It:

Hold a pair of dumbbells at arm's length next to your sides, your palms facing each other.

**(A).** Lift your right foot and take a big step to your right as you push your hips backward and lower your body by dropping your hips and bending your right knee.

**(B).** Pause, then quickly push yourself back to the starting position. That's one rep.



<https://www.womenshealthmag.com/fitness/g19988395/personal-trainer-butt-exercises/>

*Regular exercise can help you control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease, and strengthen your bones and muscles. But if it's been awhile since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.*



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