

5 Foods That Can Cause Depression

THE FOOD YOU EAT DIRECTLY AFFECTS YOUR BRAIN

By Kelly Brogan, MD



Food is the best medicine. All your cells, bones, signaling molecules, and tissues are built from what you eat. For example, dietary fats are the building blocks of brain tissue and help balance hormones, and muscles are built from protein. Different vitamins and minerals are used to create energy and send electrical impulses along neurons so that we can move, think, and feel. A nourishing diet is the best strategy against depression.

The food we eat affects both our human and microbial cells. Numerous studies have shown that food changes the collection of trillions of beneficial bacteria in our guts, called the microbiome. In the name of convenience, flavor, or simply habit, so many of us consume inflammatory foods on a daily basis that increase intestinal permeability (leaky gut), harm the microbiome, and create chronic inflammation that can lead to depression.

Many studies have shown that people who eat an anti-inflammatory diet have significantly lower risks of depression. A recent study that tracked about 6,500 women over 12 years showed that women eating an anti-inflammatory diet had a 20 percent lower risk of developing depression than their peers. These anti-inflammatory diets consist of healthy fats, vitamins and antioxidants, and plenty of high-quality protein. On the other hand, many foods in the Standard American Diet (SAD) create chronic inflammation. These five inflammatory foods are the most frequent offenders I see when treating patients for depression.

Gluten

By now almost everyone has heard of gluten, the glue-like protein found in wheat. Grains like barley, rye, and contaminated oatmeal contain proteins that may be recognized by your body as gluten. Gluten and gluten-like proteins are some of the most inflammatory foods you can eat.

Many people think that gluten doesn't affect them since they

didn't test positive for Celiac Disease. However, there are often false negatives on these tests because they don't test for the full range of gluten proteins. Whether or not you have a diagnosed sensitivity to gluten, it isn't doing you any favors, as it is almost exclusively present in processed foods.

Gluten drives inflammation by irritating the gut and gut microbes as well as intestinal tissues. This protein causes gut cells to produce a compound called zonulin, leading to intestinal permeability (or leaky gut). Gluten, which is a sticky protein, can also interfere with digestion by clumping together food particles. A recent study showed that gluten caused inflammation in gut cells of healthy volunteers, suggesting that gluten may cause adverse effects that can lead to depression in everyone.

Gluten consumption has been linked to depression, seizures, headaches, anxiety, nerve damage, and ADHD-like symptoms. Gluten has been linked to more than 200 conditions, with neurotoxicity topping the list.

I've seen amazing recoveries from people who ditched the gluten – including myself. Gluten-free diets have helped people heal from too many seemingly hopeless diagnoses, like depression, to count!

Dairy

Believe me: I understand that dairy can be deeply pleasurable. Growing up in an Italian family, many of my fondest memories involve cheese, ice cream, ricotta, and yogurt. Science supports our attachment to dairy. On a molecular level, dairy contains morphine-like compounds which engage our opiate receptors and create mild dairy addiction.

A number of studies have shown that casein, a protein found in dairy products, can drive inflammation. Casein has been linked to several psychiatric conditions, ranging from schizophrenia to depression. Dairy may not be a problem for everyone, and some people can tolerate certain types of dairy, like raw milk. Fortunately, grassfed ghee is a wonderful substitute for butter.

If you're suffering from symptoms of depression or anxiety, it's worth eliminating dairy for 30 days and seeing how you feel. Some people are able to re-introduce dairy after a month off with no problems, while others totally lose their taste for it and even vomit when trying it again!

GMOs

Genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) have become a staple in the Standard American Diet. Beyond being a population-wide experiment in manipulating nature's design, these foods, by definition, have been heavily treated with pesticides and herbicides. Since these chemicals have been designed to kill, it make sense that they're quite toxic to our own human and

microbial cells. Indeed, studies have shown that the common pesticide Roundup (glyphosate) causes cancer.

Alarming, these chemicals have been found in fetuses and breast milk, showing that the toxins used in modern farming are harming generations to come. Roundup is toxic to fetal cells and can lead to birth defects. This toxicant disrupts our microbiome, messing with the production of essential amino acids like tryptophan, absorption of minerals, and detoxification in the liver.

In addition to Roundup, the primary herbicide sprayed on GMOs like soy, GMOs also carry a variety of other toxicants that may be even more harmful in combination than alone. As even non-GMO foods can be contaminated with pesticides, I advise my clients, especially those suffering from depression, to eat organic.

Think eating organic is too expensive? Our Vital Mind Reset community support director, Shauna, has written an excellent article about eating healthy on food stamps!

Sugar and Artificial Sugar

Americans love sugar. The average American eats a staggering 164 pounds of sugar per year. Think about that for a moment. Even worse, sugar is highly addictive – the more we eat, the more we want.

Our bodies were not designed to handle the blood sugar and insulin roller coaster that many of us are on. Here's how it goes: when you eat sugar, whether it's in an obvious form like soda or a non-obvious form like pasta, your blood sugar increases quickly. This fast increase then spikes insulin. When insulin removes blood sugar, you then have a blood sugar crash, and cortisol comes in to compensate and try to move sugar out of storage and back into the bloodstream. This process, often called reactive hypoglycemia, is responsible for carb and sugar cravings (since your brain needs steady sugar to function), which leads to anxiety, headaches, irritability, and ultimately depression.

Overall, high blood sugar causes inflammation, which is one of the most significant risk factors for depression. Balancing blood sugar is one of the most effective treatments for depression and anxiety.

Sugar messes with our brain health in three main ways. First, sugar creates inflammation, often by spiking insulin and harming our gut microbiome. Next, sugar derails hormones, ultimately increasing levels of the stress hormone cortisol and disrupting the balance of sex hormones. Finally, sugar starves the brain and damages important structures in our bodies, like cell membranes and blood vessels. All this can lead to depression.

Because of all the research showing how harmful sugar is, food manufacturers have gotten creative with its naming. Don't be fooled by code names like cane sugar, crystalline fructose, maltodextrin, high-fructose corn syrup – it's all sugar.

It's tempting to swap out sugar for artificial sweeteners. Artificial sugars, like aspartame and sucralose, are "zero calorie" because they cannot be digested by the human body. But these chemicals don't just pass through your body with no effect. Artificial sugars confuse hormones and change your microbiome. A high-profile scientific article showed that artificial sugar consumption leads to metabolic syndromes like insulin resistance and diabetes. Choose sweeteners that your body recognizes, like honey.

Vegetable Oils

The Standard American Diet contains large amounts of unhealthy fats, mostly in the form of commercial vegetable oils. Many processed foods, ranging from store-bought cookies to salad dressing, contain these oils. Vegetable oils include safflower oil, corn oil, sunflower oil, soybean oil, and canola oil. These oils are considered processed because many high-heat and high-pressure steps, as well as chemical solvents, are required to create them. Further, many of these oils are made from GMOs.

For example, have you ever seen a canola plant? Canola oil, which has been touted as "heart healthy," is derived from the Canadian rapeseed plant. Recognizing that "rape oil" was not a good marketing tactic, this invention was given a new name as a combination of "Canada" and "ola," which means oil. Today, it is genetically modified by Monsanto to withstand saturation with Roundup herbicide.

In short, our bodies do not recognize vegetable oils, especially when they're heated and distorted. Consuming vegetable oils sounds the alarm of inflammation. Processed vegetable oils have been linked to thyroid dysfunction, cardiovascular diseases, nutrient deficiencies, cancer, and psychiatric disorders like depression.

So What Do I Eat?!

I recommend that people give themselves 2 to 4 weeks to kick the sugar, gluten, and dairy habit. In this time, you can try non-GMO foods and healthier fats like olive oil and lard. People are amazed by how good they feel and how quickly their tastes change.

It's can be overwhelming to try to overhauling your diet, and we've been led to seek quick and easy fixes. As someone who's radically changed her diet and outlook on eating, I assure you that the deep commitment to yourself and your health is worth it. When you remove these inflammatory foods, you can more easily tap into your intuition to properly nourish yourself.



~ Kelly Brogan, M.D. is a holistic psychiatrist, author of the *NY Times* bestselling book, *A Mind of Your Own*, *Own Your Self*, the children's book *A Time For Rain*, and co-editor of the landmark textbook, *Integrative Therapies for Depression*. She completed her psychiatric training and fellowship at NYU Medical Center after graduating from Cornell University Medical College, and has a B.S. from M.I.T. in Systems Neuroscience. She is board certified in psychiatry, psychosomatic medicine, and integrative holistic medicine, and is specialized in a root-cause resolution approach to psychiatric syndromes and symptoms. For more information and article references go to www.kellybroganmd.com.