

Bright Foods, Brighter Mood - Isaac Eliaz, MD, MS, LAc

Prescriptions for antidepressant medications are at an all-time high. As integrative practitioners, we know that in some cases these drugs can offer important relief for patients with moderate to severe depression. But we're also familiar with the research showing that most of the people who take mood-enhancing drugs are not helped in the long run. Furthermore, these drugs are associated with significant long-term side effects.

The good news is that researchers are taking an increased interest in natural solutions, including certain foods and nutrients, which can effectively address chronic depression and anxiety.

A Vicious Cycle

Research shows a close relationship between chronic inflammation, oxidative stress and depression. Stress and depression increase inflammatory and oxidative markers, and chronic inflammation fuels depression and anxiety. This vicious cycle is often aggravated by a pro-inflammatory diet; lack of exercise, toxic body burden and other factors which increase inflammatory markers throughout the body.¹

Many of the protocols to help prevent and treat pro-inflammatory, degenerative diseases can also help reduce chronic stress and depression. A number of studies point to the use of antioxidant and anti-inflammatory foods to help alleviate depression and stress, while offering additional health benefits.

Fruits and Vegetables

A study in the *British Journal of Health Psychology* looked at relationships between certain foods and emotional states in 281 college-aged adults. Subjects who ate more vegetables and fruits reported that they felt calmer, happier and more energetic.²

A larger study published in the journal *Social Indicators Research* examined the diets of 80,000 people in Britain. Results showed that happiness and emotional contentment were dependent on the *amount* of vegetables and fruits people ate. Authors conclude that seven servings of fruit and/or vegetables each day is the optimal amount to benefit emotional well-being. Subjects self-reported increases in life satisfaction, mental well-being, happiness, less nervousness and other indicators of mental and emotional wellness.³

Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean Diet has been the subject of significant study in cardiovascular health, cognitive health, aging, and other areas. This diet, rich in vegetables and olive oil and moderate in grains and protein, is shown to offer protective benefits against the onset of depressive symptoms.^{4,5}

Saffron

The most expensive spice in the world imparts more than just a distinct flavor and rich golden color. Studies show that the prized botanical offers significant therapeutic and medicinal benefits, including

antidepressant actions. Researchers believe these effects may be due to saffron's antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and neuro-protective benefits.⁶

Turmeric

Another bright golden yellow spice long revered for its medicinal benefits is turmeric. One of the most-researched botanicals, turmeric is shown to offer powerful antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and other protective benefits. Several studies show that curcumin, the active compound in turmeric that imparts its yellow color, offers significant antidepressant benefits in patients with severe depression.⁷

Citrus

Citrus fruits are good sources of vitamin C, which has been shown to offer some benefit for depression and anxiety. In addition to vitamin C, the flavonoid compounds within citrus fruits, particularly flavones and proanthocyanidins, have been shown to reduce risk of depression.⁸ The fragrance of citrus is also shown to reduce depression and support immune function.⁹

High-Fat Yogurt

GI health in general and the microbiome in particular is now known to directly influence numerous systems, including neuro-endocrine health and cognitive function. One recent study suggested that high-fat yogurt offered protective benefits against depression. It may be that the fat content in addition to the probiotics offered support for emotional wellbeing.¹⁰

Honokiol

One botanical which continues to gain attention in the medical literature is honokiol, an active extract found in magnolia bark. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, magnolia bark has been used for centuries to address neurological conditions such as anxiety, stress and depression. Preclinical studies show that honokiol interacts with the neurotransmitter GABA, thus helping to promote a sense of calm similar to diazepam, but without causing dependency or side effects. Furthermore, honokiol is a powerful antioxidant with a free radical scavenging ability up to 1,000 times higher than vitamin E; it is also a strong anti-inflammatory agent with significant neuroprotective and anti-cancer benefits. Because of its unique ability to cross the blood brain barrier, honokiol shows promise for a wide range of neurological conditions.¹¹

Breaking through the Clouds

Mood disorders are complex, with any number of cascading influences producing different symptoms. Contributing factors can include hormonal imbalances which affect the nervous system; circumstantial stress; long-term illness which reduces antioxidant activity and increases inflammation; neuro-toxins such as heavy metals; digestive problems affecting nutrient absorption; cognitive decline and much more. If you struggle with ongoing mood imbalances and your quality of life is being affected, it's important to work closely with an integrative, holistic health practitioner who can help diagnose and address potential underlying factors. As we're learning, the connections between mind and body are

intricate and vast. By supporting mental and emotional health from multiple angles, we can further enhance vitality and longevity naturally – a win/win situation.

References

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Bio

Isaac Eliaz, MD, MS, LAc, has been a pioneer in the field of integrative medicine since the early 1980's, with a specific focus on cancer, Lyme disease, detoxification and mind-body medicine. He is a respected clinician, researcher, author and educator. An AANP member and expert in the field of galectin-3, Dr. Eliaz has presented at AANP on the use of galectin-3 as an active biomarker for cancer and pro-fibrotic diseases. He is Medical Director of Amitabha Medical Clinic and Healing Center in

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