



Nutrition and mental health

Nutrition affects mental health and wellbeing. When good-quality food is eaten, children and young people's behaviour and academic performance improves.

How are nutrition and mental health linked?

Healthy eating helps children and young people cope more effectively with stress, better manage their emotions and get a good sleep – all of which are essential for assist learning.

Most research about nutrition and mental health has focused on adults. We know that good nutrition is associated with better mental health outcomes, whereas a poor diet is associated with a greater risk of depression and anxiety. However, emerging research that focuses on children and young people has also found a relationship between unhealthy diet and poorer mental health outcomes.

Poor nutrition has been associated with:

- externalising behaviour (such as hyperactivity, aggression, disobedience)
- symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- poor concentration and tiredness, which interfere with learning
- immune system function, which is also linked to mental health

- delayed brain development – high-fat, high-sugar diets can affect proteins in the body that are important for brain development
- iron deficiency, which has been linked to cognitive function impairments associated with learning and memory
- nutrient deficiencies, which have been associated with mental health conditions including depression and anxiety (we know that fruits and vegetables, grains, fish, lean red meats and olive oils are rich in important nutrients such as folate, magnesium, vitamins and zinc which all impact on body and brain functions, including mood regulation).

Dietary habits aren't always a choice

'Food insecurity' – where people don't have enough food because of, for example, unemployment and poverty – is also a problem for many families in Australia. Food insecurity can result in:

- psychological stress – high levels of ongoing stress have been related to depression and delayed brain development
- poorer academic performance
- time off from school

- anxiety
- aggression
- difficulty getting along with others.

The good news is that improving what you eat can lead to improvements in your mental health, so it's never too late to encourage healthier eating patterns.

Australian dietary guidelines

The [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#) recommend that we all increase our intake of fruit and vegetables and reduce foods high in sugar, salt and fat.

However, changing lifestyles and increased access to processed foods mean many children and young people fail to meet these recommendations. Less than 1% of children and young people aged two to 18 years consume the recommended amount of vegetables each day.

What can early learning services and schools do to encourage healthy eating?

Children and young people need support to learn about nutrition and to establish lifelong healthy eating habits.

While much of this work is done by families at home, early learning services and schools can also play a role in promoting healthy eating to help promote and support children and young people's development and learning.

Early learning services can:

- make mealtimes as relaxed and comfortable as possible
- sit and eat with the children
- talk positively about the healthy foods the children are eating
- encourage children to drink water throughout the day
- be a good role model with the foods you eat
- teach children about healthy eating in group discussions and in games and activities
- provide opportunities for cooking or food preparation (for example making a fruit salad)

- plant a vegetable garden with greens children can pick and eat (such as herbs and lettuce).

Schools can:

- only offer healthy foods in the school canteen
- create a school vegetable garden and incorporate cooking activities in class using the produce you've grown
- incorporate breaks for students to eat fruit and vegetables in class
- allow students to bring water bottles into the classroom
- be a positive role model and pack your own healthy food
- use non-food rewards (pencils, stickers) instead of sweet treats
- create partnerships with the local community (such as local food growers or food markets) and utilise these partners in school projects and work experience opportunities
- apply for funding to provide fresh fruit and vegetables in class at least once a week.

References

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External links

Eat for Health – [Eating well](#)

[Food and Mood Centre](#)

Better Health Channel – [Kids and energy needs](#)

Orygen – [Food and thought: the relationship between diet and outcomes for depression and anxiety](#)