

Nutrition can make a difference in mental health

Wash, wash, wash your hands. Ask your kids or grandkids to teach you a hand-washing song and eat healthy this flu, cold and COVID season.

Q I just started a new job with several new stressors. With this, I have been more tired and feeling down, which has made me eat more. Are there ways I can change my diet and improve my mental health? — TJ, Greenville

A Mental health is an especially important issue for people in eastern North Carolina, and too often people don't realize that nutrition can make a difference. Two Brody School of Medicine student leaders, God-give Umzurike (3rd year) and Michael Denning (4th year) wanted to share ideas about this. Umzurike hopes to pursue a dual residency in internal or family medicine and psychiatry.

In recent years, more people have started paying attention to how what we eat affects how we feel. The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being that helps people handle stress, recognize their



KATHY KOLASA

the brain and emotional health is critical. This article explores how eating the right foods supports mental health and emotional resilience.

Good mental health relates to feeling connected to others, overcoming challenges and maintaining a positive outlook. According to the Centers for Disease Control, people with positive emotional well-being are less likely to get sick, recover faster from setbacks and experience greater happiness. A holistic view emphasizes caring for both the mind and body.

Overall, our brains use about 20% of the body's energy, needing glucose, healthy fats, vitamins and minerals. Missing these nutrients

abilities, learn, work well and contribute to their communities. With rising rates of stress, anxiety and depression worldwide, understanding how food impacts

the brain and emotional health is critical. This article explores how eating the right foods supports mental health and emotional resilience. Good mental health relates to feeling connected to others, overcoming challenges and maintaining a positive outlook. According to the Centers for Disease Control, people with positive emotional well-being are less likely to get sick, recover faster from setbacks and experience greater happiness. A holistic view emphasizes caring for both the mind and body.

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Antioxidants in berries and leafy greens protect brain cells.

Practical steps include adding brain-friendly foods like leafy greens, salmon and yogurt with live and active cultures (a probiotic) to your diet, limiting added sugars and cutting back or eliminating alcohol and focusing on a balanced approach rather than restrictive fad diets. Well-rounded meals of complex carbs (found in whole grains, sweet potatoes, chickpeas and beans), lean proteins (such as chicken breast, ground meat labeled as 90% lean, eggs and Greek yogurt) and healthy fats, such as unsaturated fats, stabilize mood, and drink water to stay hydrated to prevent concentration issues. Moderating caffeine intake (less than 400 mg/daily) helps manage stress and sleep.

Some meal ideas include oatmeal with berries, quinoa bowls or salmon with greens. If you aren't familiar with a quinoa bowl, there are lots of recipes on the internet. Prepare quinoa and fill the bottom of a bowl, then top it with vegetables, a protein (optional) and a sauce. You have a

healthy meal in one bowl. Mindful eating, such as slowing down and listening to hunger cues of fullness as you eat, reduces stress and overeating.

Food can be a powerful tool for improving mental health. Simple, manageable dietary changes can help nourish both your body and mind. By embracing a diet rich in whole, nutrient-dense foods (foods with lots of nutrients for their calories, like spinach, eggs, nuts, beans and yogurt), you can support your mental well-being and build resilience against stress and anxiety. Remember, "What you eat today can nourish your mind tomorrow." For personalized guidance, consider speaking with a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN), mental health professional or health coach to create a plan that works best for you.

Taking small steps today can lead to a healthier, happier tomorrow, and we hope you enjoy your new job.

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TASTEFOOD

Valentine's Day dessert calls for classic pairing

Pots de creme are a classic and luscious French dessert. Translated to "pots of cream," they are individual ramekins filled with a silken custard, often chocolate.

Marvelously French in sensibility, pots de creme are simple yet refined, timelessly appealing and crafted with a short list of quality ingredients. They are versatile as well, presented unadorned and understated for easy eating or garnished with a little bling for a special occasion.

These terrines of chocolate get dressed up for Valentine's Day with an infusion of raspberry liqueur rippling through the custard for celebratory sparkle. Raspberry and chocolate are a classic pairing.

The fresh tartness of the berry balances the creamy richness of the chocolate,



LINDA BALSLEV

essentially lightening and brightening each bite. Serve with a dollop of whipped cream — infused with raspberry liqueur, of course — and a few fresh berries for a dessert worthy of your Valentine.

Pots de creme should be prepared at least six to 24 hours in advance of serving, which is ideal for easy entertaining.

CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY POTS DE CREME

Active time: 40 minutes
Total time: 1 hour and 10 minutes, plus chilling time

Serving: Makes 6 (3/4-cup/6-ounce) ramekins

Ingredients:

Pots de creme:

- 1 3/4 cups heavy cream
- 3/4 cup whole milk
- 6 ounces high-quality dark chocolate (70% to 72%), finely chopped
- 6 egg yolks
- 1/2 cup granulated

sugar

■ 2 tablespoons Creme de Framboise or Chambord

Whipped cream:

- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 to 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar, plus more for sprinkling
- 1 tablespoon Creme de Framboise
- Fresh raspberries

Preparation:

Heat the oven to 325 degrees. Place the six ramekins in a baking dish.

Heat the cream and milk in a saucepan over medium heat until the liquid begins to simmer. Immediately remove the pan from the heat. Add the chocolate and whisk until melted and smooth.

Whisk the egg yolks and sugar in a large bowl until light in color. Add the chocolate mixture in a steady stream, whisking constantly to combine. Whisk in the raspberry liqueur. Strain the custard through a fine-mesh sieve into another bowl or a large measuring glass and cool for 5 minutes.

Bring a kettle of water to a boil.

Ladle or pour the custard into the ramekins. Cover the ramekins with foil. Fill the pan with the hot water halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Transfer to the oven and bake until the edges are set but the centers still wobble a bit when jiggled, 30 to 35 minutes.

Transfer the ramekins to a wire rack and remove the foil. Cool completely. Cover each ramekin with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight. Before serving, make the

whipped cream. Mix the cream in the bowl of an electric mixer on high speed until traces of the whisk appear. Add the sugar and raspberry liqueur and continue to mix until peaks form.

Serve the pots de creme topped with a dollop of the whipped cream. Garnish with a few raspberries and dust with confectioners' sugar.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning writer, cookbook author, and recipe developer based in northern California. Visit TasteFood at TasteFood-blog.com.



LYNDA BALSLEV FOR TASTEFOOD

Raspberry and chocolate are a classic pairing. The fresh tartness of the berry balances the creamy richness of the chocolate, essentially lightening and brightening each bite.

ASK THE DOCTORS

It's still a good idea to get a flu shot

Hello, dear readers, and welcome to our monthly letters column. We are deep into flu season. After a quick glance at the latest data — up to 22 million infections, 10 million medical visits and at least 160,000 hospitalizations — we are once again urging our readers to take all precautions, including getting this year's flu shot. The flu is miserable, dangerous and unpredictable, and we think it makes sense to grab any advantage you can. And now, onward to your questions.

■ In a recent column, we mounted a spirited defense of oatmeal, which had been disparaged as nutritionally useless by a doctor who is popular on social media. We were happy to be able to say that, in addition to delivering important nutrients, oatmeal contains a type of soluble fiber that supports metabolism and contributes to the health and diversity of the gut microbiome.

The topic led to this question from a reader: "In the column you mention cooked oats several times," she wrote. "Are uncooked oats equally nutritious, or does cooking make some of the nutrients more readily accessible for the body to use?"

Cooked and uncooked oats have the same basic nutritional profiles. However, cooked oats may be easier to digest, which would make the nutrients more available. When it comes to beta-glucan, the important soluble fiber we mentioned, research shows that both cooked and uncooked oats have equal amounts.

■ We recently wrote about bird flu, also known as H5N1. It can move from animals to humans and cause infections that range from mild to severe. We have heard from



ELIZABETH KO

several readers asking about transmission.

"Has there been any human-to-human transmission of bird flu?" a reader from California asked.

Although there have been several cases of bird flu in people, at this time there are no known cases of human-to-human transmission of bird flu in the U.S.

■ A reader from Pennsylvania who dipped into our archives has a precaution to add to a column about how to stay safe while hiking in extreme heat.

"Please remind hikers to let someone — a friend, family member, neighbor — know where they are going to be hiking, when they are leaving and when they expect to be back," she wrote. "Although cell reception is often poor or nonexistent in many hiking locations, having a fully charged cellphone is also a good idea when starting out on a hike on a hot day."

Thank you for this important advice. We have also been hearing from people who hike in snow and cold, and will soon have a column about safeguarding your health in those circumstances.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to write. It is a pleasure to hear from so many of you. Please know that we read all of your letters and respond to as many as we can. Also, it is time for a reminder that we cannot offer a diagnosis, a second opinion, make referrals, look at your personal medical data or comment on specific treatment plans.

Eve Glazier, M.D., MBA, is an internist and associate professor of medicine at UCLA Health. **Elizabeth Ko**, M.D., is an internist and assistant professor of medicine at UCLA Health.

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