

Support your mental health through a good diet

Pitt Partners for Health is sponsoring another Penny Pinchers Healthy Grocery Store Tour at no charge, this time at 6 p.m. at the Food Lion on N.C. 102 in Ayden. Call or email Devette Thomas at 847-6497 or dmthomas@ecuhealth.org for more information and to register. Spots are limited.



KATHY KOLASA

During Mental Health Awareness Month, I heard that what I eat can affect my mental health. What should you eat and drink? — CC, Greenville

I have asked Morgan Wynn, an ECU nutrition and dietetics Honors College student, to answer this question. Here is what she wants you to know.

Many people may think that what you eat or drink does not affect your mental health, but this could not be further from the truth. In

fact, your digestive tract and brain are intricately connected by something called the gut-brain axis. This axis allows for your digestive system and brain to communicate every time you eat.

This also means that the quality of the food you eat is important in maintaining your mental health. For example, studies have shown that depending on what you eat, your risk for depression or anxiety can increase or decrease.

So, to answer the question of what you should eat to improve mental health, add lots of nutrient-dense foods into your diet. Foods

high in fiber, omega 3 fatty acids and zinc all have been proven in studies to improve mental health status, including improving anxiety and depression symptoms. These nutrients can be found in a variety of foods, all of which can be easily implemented into your everyday diet.

Fiber is typically found in non-starchy vegetables (like green beans, greens, broccoli, etc.) or in other foods like whole grains (oatmeal, brown rice, quinoa, etc.) and beans (lentils, black beans, peas, etc.). In addition to having an impact on your mental health, fiber also has many other benefits including lowering cholesterol levels, keeping you fuller longer, maintaining blood sugar levels and more.

It is recommended that we eat about 28 grams of fiber each day. Read the

Nutrition Facts labels to see how much fiber there is in the foods you like to eat. Many Americans do not reach this mark each day, so try to reach your fiber goal for a few days and see if you notice any differences in how you feel. Note that it is recommended by professionals to work your way up to this fiber intake goal, as going from “0 to 100” can cause undesirable gastrointestinal side effects.

Omega 3 fatty acids are the building blocks of the fat in our bodies and the food we eat; they are usually found in foods like fish and other seafood, nuts, seeds and plant oils, among other things. The recommended amount of omega 3 fatty acids that you should aim to eat each day is about 1.1 grams for women and 1.6 grams for men. Some foods also have omega 3s added into them, like some brands

of yogurt, eggs and milk. Zinc is a nutrient that can be found in foods such as yogurt, beef, oats, turkey, shrimp and pumpkin seeds, among other foods. It is recommended that you should consume about 11 milligrams of zinc each day.

There is some overlap between these nutrients in some foods, so try looking for a product such as yogurt that includes all these nutrients. This is a great way to help improve your mental health and get “more bang for your buck.”

Another way to include these nutrients, along with plenty of others, is to try an eating style like the Mediterranean diet. This diet focuses on a plant-predominate eating style, with complements of lean proteins. One study showed that the Mediterranean diet lowered the odds of moderate to severe depression

symptoms by almost half.

A registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) will also be able to help you create a personal meal plan that includes nutrient-dense foods, or those that have lots of nutrients for the calories, including those with fiber, omega 3s and zinc. These health professionals have a vast knowledge of the body, science, food and nutrition, and will be able to help you plan a diet with foods you enjoy that will positively support your mental health.

Remember that everything you feed your body has a direct impact on how your brain functions, so make informed decisions on what you choose to eat.

Professor emeritus Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.

TASTEFOOD

The secret is in the sauce for this meatloaf

The sauce for this meatloaf does double duty as a glaze and a flavoring agent for the meat. It's purposely savory and tangy, erring on the side of a less-sweet meatloaf while driving flavor and spice into the meat. A combination of beef and pork mirrors a classic Italian meatball, but feel free to switch the meat ratios to your preference. You can also replace the beef and pork with tur-

key — preferably dark meat if possible. Light turkey meat is less flavorful.

The key to a light and moist meatloaf (besides the meat) is to not overwork the meat when combining the ingredients. Use your hands or a paddle attachment on an electric mixer on low speed. When forming the meatloaf, you can spread it in a loaf pan, but I prefer to use a large baking dish or baking sheet. This exposes the surface so the edges will crisp.

CHIPOTLE MEATLOAF
Active time: 20 minutes



LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTEFOOD

The key to a light and moist meatloaf (besides the meat) is to not overwork the meat when combining the ingredients.

- Total time:** 1 hour and 20 minutes
Yield: Serves 4 to 6
Ingredients:
- 1 1/2 pounds ground beef chuck
 - 8 ounces ground pork
 - 3 garlic cloves, grated
 - 2 large eggs, lightly whisked
 - 1 cup finely diced cheddar cheese
 - 3/4 cup panko breadcrumbs
 - 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
 - 1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
 - 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
 - 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 - 1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika
 - 1/2 teaspoon chipotle chili powder
 - 1/2 teaspoon dried

- oregano
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 - Chopped fresh cilantro leaves for garnish
- Glaze:**
- 1 cup ketchup
 - 2 tablespoons dark brown sugar
 - 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
 - 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
 - 1 canned chipotle in adobo sauce, minced, plus 2 teaspoons adobo sauce
 - 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
 - 1 teaspoon garlic powder
 - 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
 - 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Preparation:**
Heat the oven to 350 degrees.
Combine the sauce

ingredients in a bowl and whisk to blend.

Combine the meatloaf ingredients and 2 tablespoons of the sauce in a large bowl. Using your hands, mix the ingredients to thoroughly combine without overworking the meat.

Shape the meat into a loaf about 9 inches long and 5 inches wide. Place the loaf in the center of a baking dish or on a rimmed baking sheet lined with foil or parchment.

Transfer to the oven and cook the meatloaf for 45 minutes. Brush with some of the sauce, then continue to cook until the center of the meat registers 160 degrees with a meat thermometer, about 15 minutes more.

Remove the meatloaf from the oven. Tent with foil and let rest for 10 to 15 minutes. Transfer to a serving platter. Baste with additional sauce and garnish with cilantro. Slice and serve with any remaining sauce on the side.

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

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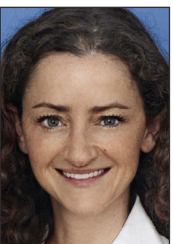
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ASK THE DOCTORS

Not all hydration comes from drinking

Hello, dear readers, and welcome to the first letters column of autumn. How quickly the summer flew by. That means it's time to schedule vaccinations and boosters, and to stock up on COVID tests — yes, it's still with us. Speaking of which, the new COVID-19 vaccine addresses the newest crop of variants, so don't skip that one. And now, your letters.

■ The importance of staying hydrated comes up in a lot of columns. This may be a challenge for older adults, who can experience a decrease in the signals that indicate thirst. A reader with a tip to share also had a question.



EVE GLAZIER



ELIZABETH KO

cussed the challenges some people face in keeping their skin moisturized. Dry skin can be caused by a dry environment, sensitivity to chemicals in soaps and cleaning products, frequent hand-washing, inadequate hydration and as an effect of aging. We heard from a reader with concerns about their solution to dealing with dry skin.

“I like to use Vaseline to

help me deal with dry skin. It is amazing how well it works, and how quickly it disappears into my skin,” he wrote. “But I also have a problem with weight control. Is it possible that this is contributing to my weight?”

Vaseline, also known as petroleum jelly, is safe for most people to use on their skin. The main caveat is it can contribute to acne in people prone to breakouts. Regarding your question about Vaseline being absorbed by the body and contributing to weight gain, the answer is no. Our skin can absorb oils and fatty acids, but it does not metabolize them. They do not contribute to calorie counts or to weight gain.

As always, we appreciate your taking the time to write to us. We have recently had some very kind letters — thank you! — and we are very glad to know these columns are useful.

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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