Can Nutrition Help Your Adolescent Thwart Depression & Anxiety?

Adolescent depression and anxiety disorders are increasing at an alarming rate. Recent statistics suggest the rates of depression triple during the ages of 12-17 years, and that one out of five teens will be diagnosed with clinical depression or anxiety disorders. The good news is that proper nutrition can play a role in the prevention and management of these conditions. According to Marie Roth, registered dietitian for Blythedale and Kohl’s Eat Well, Be Well Nutrition Outreach Program, there are several dietary modifications that may have therapeutic effects and should be evaluated and considered:

**Vitamin D**- the “sunshine vitamin” is getting lots of press for its vast list of health benefits. A recent article in *Clinical Nutrition* reports a link between reduced levels of vitamin D and an increased risk of depression and panic disorders. It suggests having a vitamin D level of at least 30 ng/dL may lower the risk of depression by 43 percent and the risk of having panic disorder by 67 percent.

**Tryptophan**- Various studies show that low plasma levels of tryptophan, an essential amino acid and precursor to the “happiness neurotransmitter” serotonin, can induce many of the symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. Eating foods or taking supplements that boost levels of tryptophan can balance serotonin and other neurotransmitter levels and reduce symptoms- in some cases as well as antidepressant medications. Foods highest in tryptophan include shellfish, seafood, wild game meats, fresh turkey meat, poultry, pork, spinach, watercress, eggwhites, sesame/sunflower seeds, & silken tofu.

**Omega-3 Fatty Acids**- According to UCLA’s Brain Research Institute, omega-3 fatty acids play an important role in brain health and mental disorder prevention despite studies remaining inconclusive about their link to lower levels of depression. These essential fats are constituents of brain cell membranes and are required for brain cell signaling and communication as well as normal brain function. Eating wild caught fish 2x per week and incorporating walnuts, flaxseed, chia seeds, avocados, and omega-3 fortified eggs into the week’s meals and snacks can help your teen meet their daily requirements.

**Limiting Processed Food**- an Australian study of 3,040 adolescents aged 12-18 years found an inverse relationship between quality of diet and mental health disorders. Those participants who ate diets high in processed foods tended to have lower mental health scores compared to those who ate more natural, whole foods. Improvements in diet quality also resulted in improvements in mental health when re-evaluated.

This message was brought to you by Blythedale and Kohl’s Eat Well, Be Well Nutrition Program
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