

Foods that can reduce anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Anxiety is a sign and symptom of stress – and stress can be physical, mental, emotional or chemical in nature.

There are foods that have been shown to have a calming effect after eating them, as well as foods that increase stress or anxiety.

Regulate your blood sugar

For starters, eating a well-balanced diet and drinking enough water – 64 ounces a day is a general recommendation – will definitely improve your mood and help relieve stress.

Keeping your blood sugar stable will help reduce anxiety.

This can be done by choosing whole-grain carbohydrates and lean protein at breakfast, and by not skipping meals:

- Whole grains are rich in magnesium and tryptophan, both of which have been shown to lessen anxiety and improve mood.
- Dark leafy greens such as spinach, nuts and legumes are also abundant sources of magnesium.
- Asparagus – which is rich in potassium, fiber, vitamins A, C, E and K, and the beneficial trace element chromium – is also known to reduce anxiety. The Chinese government has approved asparagus extract as a natural functional food for its anxiety-reducing properties.
- Food rich in B vitamins, such as avocados and almonds, have been shown to reduce stress and anxiety.

Antioxidants: good for the system and the psyche

Antioxidants, too, can help lessen symptoms of anxiety.

Blueberries and acai are excellent sources of antioxidants. A study published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry in 2012 looked at 80 subjects with general anxiety disorder (GAD) and depression and found that after six weeks of taking supplements of antioxidant vitamins (Vitamin A, C and E), their conditions improved significantly. The study team concluded that antioxidant supplements were a useful supportive therapy for patients with anxiety and depression.

A 2011 study of medical students linked omega 3 fats to a reduction in anxiety levels. Omega 3 fats, which previously had been shown to reduce depression, can be taken in supplement form or by including fatty fish such as salmon in your diet.

The mineral zinc also has been shown to lessen anxiety. It is found in cashews, beef and egg yolks.

Chocolate: the stress minimizer

Last and most exciting of foods with anxiety reducing properties is chocolate! Chocolate, especially dark chocolate (it has less added sugars), can improve mood and reduce the stress hormone cortisol, which is linked to anxiety.

Incorporating these foods into a well-balanced diet can positively improve mood and help lessen anxiety. It is a good idea to work with a dietitian who can take into consideration any other medical concerns you may have, along with your individual nutritional needs.

Tracking your food intake in a food journal or app (My Fitness Pal, for example) can help lessen anxiety by providing a feeling of control and making you aware of overindulging from stress or anxiety.

Foods that trigger anxiety

Just as there are foods that can have a positive effect on mood and stress, others can make anxiety worse. They include:

- Simple sugars (sweetened beverages, cookies, cakes, candies and non-whole wheat grains)
- Fried foods (battered chicken or fish, chips, French fries, etc.)
- Alcohol
- Excessive caffeine

Be patient

It takes time for dietary changes to have a positive effect on your anxiety level, so be patient with yourself and stick with your plan.

Nutrition is often a part of anxiety treatment, combined with:

- Counseling
- Increasing physical activity
- Getting better sleep
- Addressing other lifestyle factors
- Medication

The correct treatment varies for everyone.