

## Healthy Eating is Key When it Comes to Mental Health

There are countless reasons to follow a healthy diet when it comes to our health – from managing blood pressure and protecting our heart health to fueling for exercise – a diet that is high in fiber, vitamins and minerals, healthy fats, and lean protein is associated with overall better health outcomes. But did you know that mental health can also be affected by what you eat? In general, diets that are high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, and lean meat are associated with decreased risk for depression. In addition, there is strong research that shows that eating a diet high in serotonin-boosting foods can aid in better sleep and overall better mental health.

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that is important for mood, sleep-regulation, and hunger cues. Our gut contains a high number of serotonin receptors and thus a high quality diet can have great impact on mental health. However, foods that are especially high in tryptophan (an essential amino acid) can promote serotonin production and thus possibly have a great impact on emotional wellbeing. These foods include:

- Salmon
- Nuts and nut butters
- Eggs
- Cheese
- Pineapple
- Turkey

Nuts are also high in magnesium, another nutrient that is associated with combating anxiety and helping to boost mood.

We also know that intake of less healthy foods can contribute to poor mental health. Diets high in processed foods and sugar are often linked to higher risk for anxiety and depression. A recent study published in the journal *BMC Psychiatry* showed that a dietary sugar increase of 100 g per day (the equivalent of two 16-oz sodas) was linked to a 28% higher prevalence of depression. In this study, researchers analyzed data from more than 18,000 adults aged 20 and older between 2011 and 2018. One of the possible reasons for this association is that a high sugar diet can disrupt the gut microbiota (the bacteria in your digestive tract) and lead to depression.

It's clear that a diet that focuses more on whole foods and less on processed foods and sugar may be helpful in improving mental health. To help you and your loved ones to keep smiling, try this lower sugar homemade granola, full of mood-boosting whole grains, dried fruit, and nuts. Serve on top of Greek yogurt or have as an afternoon snack to fuel up for a walk.

### Home Made Granola Recipe

#### Ingredients

- 4 cups old-fashioned rolled oats
- 1 ½ cup nuts and/or seeds such as almonds, pecans or pumpkin seeds
- 1/2 teaspoon salt ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ cup canola or olive oil

- 1/3 cup maple syrup or honey
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup dried fruit such as cranberries, chopped dried apricots, or raisins (opt for ones with no added sugar)

Directions:

- 1) Preheat oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit and line a large, rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper.
- 2) In a large mixing bowl, combine the oats, nuts and/or seeds, salt and cinnamon. Stir to blend.
- 3) Pour in the oil, maple syrup and/or honey and vanilla. Mix well, until every oat and nut is lightly coated. Pour the granola onto your prepared pan and use a large spoon to spread it in an even layer.
- 4) Bake until lightly golden, about 30 minutes, stirring halfway (for extra-clumpy granola, press the stirred granola down with your spatula to create a more even layer). The granola will further crisp up as it cools.
- 5) Let the granola cool completely). Add the dried fruit once cool. Break the granola into pieces.
- 6) Store the granola in an airtight container at room temperature for 1 to 2 weeks, or in a sealed freezer bag in the freezer for up to 3 months.