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Food and Mood: Atkins Can Help

Does this sound familiar? You're depressed, anxious or tired—or all three. You know what the solution is: eat. The food you eat can have a major impact on how you feel—and vice versa.

The High-Carb Mood Trap

When you're feeling down—no matter why—chances are your first instinct is to reach for the chip. That high-carb comfort food. That food may indeed lift your spirits a bit, because eating carbs can increase serotonin, a neurotransmitter that plays a role in depression. While the pleasure of eating the food may cheer you up, once the serotonin increase, those positive effects are far outweighed by the ultimate negative effect of the crash. Within a few hours you're likely to experience an energy crash as your blood sugar level takes a dip. Depressed, irritable, edgy, tired, unable to concentrate—and hungry. Then the cycle starts all over again.

Stable Blood Sugar, Stable Mood

What if you turned the food-mood equation around? Instead of using food to try to change your mood, what if you improved your mood to begin with? Controlling your carbs can be a valuable way to lift and stabilize your mood. When you lose the food cravings that can derail your weight-loss efforts, you regain focus and you enhance your mental alertness.

To understand why, think a bit about your blood-sugar levels. When your blood sugar jumps because you've eaten a high-carb meal, your body squirts out some insulin to clear all that sugar away. That big sugar spike, followed by a big insulin spike, will drop your blood sugar below where it needs to be leaving you tired and feeling under the weather.

But when you eat a meal low in carbs—especially one that's also rich in fiber from vegetables—you don't go on the **blood sugar roller coaster**. Nor do you get the low-sugar blues a couple of hours after you eat. In addition, when you're doing Atkins, you can have a low-carb snack between meals. (Some people find it helpful to eat five or six small meals instead of three large ones.) That helps even out your blood sugar levels and keeps your mood on an even keel, and that in turn helps stop your cravings for high-carb foods. That doesn't mean you'll never feel down again, but once you're following the Atkins lifestyle, you're a lot more likely to reach for a healthful low-carb food instead of potato chips or cookies, and avoid repeating the sugar roller coaster ride, which will only make things worse.

Better Nutrition

If you've been eating the typical American diet full of carbs or if you've been following a reduced-calorie, low-fat diet as a way to lose weight, you may well have been short-changing yourself of B vitamins, iron, selenium and essential nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids. (In fact, a number of studies have shown that fish oil supplements can be a helpful treatment for depression.) When you start eating the low-carb way, you'll be eating plenty of vegetables, nuts and, in later phases, some whole grains that will improve your nutritional profile. High-quality protein and whole grains will replenish your low levels of B vitamins; red meat and vegetables such as spinach will build up your iron stores; and nuts will increase your selenium levels. Similarly, fish, olive oil, avocados and nuts will provide plenty of essential fatty acids.

Caffeine Jitters

The caffeine in coffee acts as a stimulant, which can make you feel better, but, too much of it can make you feel jittery and on edge. Consumed too close to bedtime, it can also interfere with a good night's sleep and leave you groggy the next morning. If you drink more than two to three cups of coffee each day, consider cutting back or switching to decaf. You could also substitute black or green tea, which has less caffeine but lots of valuable antioxidants. Many diet soft drinks, such as colas and Mountain Dew, contain caffeine. Cut back on the caffeine and you might be surprised at how much better you feel after a few days.

Be sure to drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses of fluid a day, primarily as water, but some of which can be coffee, tea or herb tea. Mild dehydration from not drinking enough is a common but often overlooked cause of fatigue.

The Chocolate Connection

What's the quickest food fix for a bad mood? Chocolate, of course. In fact, one study suggests that chocolate is the single most craved food in America. The value of chocolate for lifting depression probably comes from more than just the pleasure derived from its fat, sweetness, creamy texture and delicious aroma. A number of different stimulants naturally found in chocolate could help to raise your spirits, including caffeine. Chocolate is also good source of antioxidants. In fact, one 2-ounce chocolate bar has the same amount of polyphenols as a 5-ounce glass of red wine. Chocolate may cheer you up and even be good for your health, but a typical chocolate bar is high in carbs. To enjoy a low-carb chocolate treat, try an **Atkins Advantage Bar**. Or once you're past Phase 1, Induction, you can have an **Atkins Indulge Bar**.

References

1. Stoll, A.L., Severus, W.E., Freeman, M.P., et al., "Omega 3 Fatty Acids in Bipolar Disorder: A Preliminary Double-Blind, Placebo-Controlled Trial," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 56(5), 1999, pages 407-412.

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2. Bruinsma K. and Taren, D.L., "Chocolate: Food or Drug," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 99(10), 1999, pages 1249-1256.