

Key to good health? A proper diet for the brain

March 23 2012, by Meghan Berry

(Medical Xpress) -- When a psychiatrist sets out to write a diet book, he doesn't have a slimmer waistline in mind. Drew Ramsey, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry and coauthor of *The Happiness Diet* (Rodale, 2011), believes good health and happiness are achieved when the brain is consistently fed all the nutrients it needs for optimal cognitive and emotional functioning.

The modern [American diet](#)—or MAD, as Ramsey calls it—fails to nourish the brain. Heavily processed foods loaded with sugar and toxins have given rise not only to America's obesity epidemic, but also an epidemic of depression, which Ramsey contends is even more dangerous. Studies show that obese people's brains actually age faster than those of people at a normal weight, and excess weight has been linked to dementia.

“The Happiness Diet focuses on nutrition from the brain's perspective with a primary goal of improved brain health,” said Ramsey, 37. “While weight loss happens on this diet, the main goal is brain growth.”

Ramsey and his coauthor, Tyler Graham, a journalist who specializes in health and fitness, based their diet on nutrients they deemed the “essential elements of happiness.” They include vitamin B12, used in the production of brain cells, as well as magnesium, vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids, said to improve memory, counter seasonal depression and promote strong neurons. Even cholesterol, which forms a crucial protective layer around the brain, gets a nod.

Ramsey, a practicing [psychiatrist](#) on the Upper West Side, always asks his patients what they eat. He believes this is the closest thing to primary prevention in psychiatry. When people eat too few calories, they can be depressed and irritable, so when patients are willing, he helps them overhaul their diet.

“Just eating kale and salmon won’t give you bliss, but by promoting stable, positive moods, better focus and concentration, and improved energy, people will engage in their lives in ways that promote feeling their best,” Ramsey said.

Today, an average person on MAD eats three pounds of sugar every week. In order to make the switch to the Happiness Diet of organic and whole foods, Ramsey said “carbage” and “bad mood foods”—primarily sugar-laden foods, industrial fats and factory-farmed meat—must be cut. He also urges readers to steer clear of artificially flavored foods and foods labeled “low fat” and “fat free.” When fats are extracted from foods, they’re usually replaced with refined sugars, which are less satisfying and have no nutritional value. “Basically, don’t eat stuff out of a package,” he said.

Ramsey devotes a portion of his book to the origins of MAD and the advances in industry that brought processed foods to the mainstream. Though the Happiness Diet is not a diet in the traditional sense, the book does include a number of diet recommendations.

“The good news is that the Happiness Diet is made of foods you already like,” he said. It’s a plant-based diet, though meat is an important component. He says it’s important to eat a wide variety of organic vegetables because conventional vegetables, depending on how they were farmed, are diminished in vital nutrients. A diet of whole foods naturally contains less fat and sodium.

Ramsey is a former vegetarian who grew up on an organic farm in southern Indiana. “I had problems with energy and focus until I started eating fish. Vegetarianism doesn’t make sense when you look at nutrition, but I agree with vegetarians in that we need to reform our eating,” he said.

Ramsey recommends eating wild seafood at least twice a week, and said red meat should always be organic and grass fed. Cows fed a grain-based diet are more susceptible to illness and are then treated with antibiotics, which we in turn eat. “Factory-raised meat and dairy are the top dietary source of toxins,” he said. For this reason, he also recommends eating organic eggs and drinking organic whole milk.

In *The Happiness Diet*, Ramsey ranks the top foods for boosting energy (mesclun, coffee, chocolate, walnuts, red beans, and blue- and red-skinned potatoes), mood (wild salmon, shrimp, cherry tomatoes, watermelon, chili peppers, beets and garlic), and focus (eggs, grass-fed beef, organic whole milk, Brussels sprouts, grapefruit, lemon, berries and anchovies). The book also includes shopping lists and enough recipes for several weeks on the Happiness [Diet](#), as well as money-saving tips like buying meat straight from the farm and joining a community-share agriculture group to have direct access to fresh, seasonal vegetables.

“People always say eating organic is expensive, but if you consider what a MAD eater will need to spend on health care down the road, it’s really not at all,” said Ramsey. “And why wouldn’t you want to invest in your [brain](#)?”

Provided by Columbia University

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