

# Unhealthy diets linked with mental health of children

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Children and adolescents who ate foods high in saturated fats, refined carbohydrates and processed foods appear to experience more depression and low moods, suggests a new systematic research review in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The review found a significant, cross-sectional relationship between unhealthy dietary patterns and poorer mental health in youth.

Lead reviewer Adrienne O'Neil, Ph.D., of the School of Medicine at Deakin University in Australia, said, "The evidence that poor [dietary intake](#) could be a risk factor for [mental health](#) issues in both adults and children is only very new – much of the data has emerged over the past seven years – thus widespread recognition is lacking. This is slowly

changing, however, with the emergence of societies such as the International Society of Nutritional Psychiatric Research and the Alliance for the Prevention of Mental Disorders."

O'Neil and her team evaluated 12 studies from several countries – among them Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Norway – including results from nearly 83,000 children aged four-and-a-half to 18 years. To measure mental health, the studies most commonly used subscales of the Child Behavior Checklist and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Dietary intake evaluations primarily used variations of the Food Frequency Questionnaire. "Our findings highlight the potential importance of the relationship between dietary patterns or quality and mental health early in the life span," the reviewers wrote, noting that further study on the issue is required.

"Given that the average age of onset for anxiety and mood disorders is six years and 13 years, respectively, the potential for early intervention using strategies targeted at improving dietary intake at a population level may be of substantial [public health](#) benefit," the reviewers added. "However, this would require policy action to improve the global food environment."

"This systematic review assessed the relationship between children's dietary intake and mental health by evaluating the level of evidence of cross-sectional studies, meaning that diet and mental health were measured at the same time, so you can't tell which came first," said Jayne A. Fulkerson, Ph.D., director of the Center for Child and Family Health Promotion Research at the University of Minnesota. This type of review has limitations because it does not allow one to estimate the strength of the relationship between good quality diet and better mental health, she explained.

"However," Fulkerson noted, "we know that good nutrition can help

children in a variety of ways, including better concentration, school performance, and weight, so providing healthful foods is an important factor to promote children's health, including mood." She added that "Parents who are concerned about their children's moods should discuss this with a professional health care provider who can assess whether it is normative or needs further evaluation."

**More information:** O'Neil A, Quirk SE, Housden S, et al. "Relationship between diet and mental health in children and adolescents: a systematic review." *American Journal of Public Health*: October 2014, Vol. 104, No. 10, pp. e31-e42.

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