

HOW VEGANISM CAN BENEFIT YOUR MIND



Veganism is the practice of avoiding animal products for food, clothing or other reasons. Some people may think that avoiding meat and dairy to reduce stress, anxiety and depression is an impossibility because eating meat has become such a common part of Western culture. With more research coming out regarding vegan diets and mental health benefits, however, it seems that vegans are actually less susceptible to these issues than consumers of meat products.

Stress, anxiety and depression are among the most common mental health issues in Western society affecting 1 in 5 adults and 7% of children in the US Anxiety (1). A whopping 168 million people in the world have depression (2). Lifestyle changes such as regular exercise and healthy eating can help support your efforts to be mentally (and physically) well. The first step in this process is revamping what we put into our bodies. After all, we are what we eat!

To start making positive lifestyle choices for yourself you should consider eating more stress-busting foods like fruits & vegetables. Cutting back on animal by-products, processed foods and sugary snacks or drinks is also a good start (3). So eating a vegan diet is a great way to go.

Stress often makes us eat foods that can worsen anxious feelings, such as sugars and refined carbohydrates. They can also affect sleep patterns, which has been shown to trigger depression. A great vegan substitute for sweet treats are berries. Blackcurrants, strawberries, raspberries etc. contain phytonutrients. These are compounds that act as natural supplements to promote positive changes in your body. Phytonutrients are anti-oxidants which reduce inflammation (4). Unfortunately, inflammation is one of the

causes of poor brain health, which has a knock-on effect on poor mental health (5). So get nibbling on those lovely berries full of vegan deliciousness and health benefits.

It's been said that what you eat can make a difference in how your brain performs. A healthy diet full of fruits, vegetables and whole grains will not only contribute to better moods but also help with focus and thinking skills!

The gut needs to have a lot of healthy, thriving bacteria in it to keep us mentally healthy. Research has shown that there is a strong link between the gut and the brain; with less bacteria in the gut linked to depression. (6) To keep your gut healthy and reduce the chances of anxiety and depression there are a few things you need to do. And a vegan diet is one of them.

Eating fermented foods (known as probiotics) increases the number of healthy bacteria in the gut. Sauerkraut and kimchi (cabbage) along with pickled vegetables are some of the best you can eat and they are all vegan and delicious (7).

These bacteria need to be 'fed' as well to keep them plentiful. The more there are, the better we feel. Good bacteria need fibre in the diet (known as prebiotics). And the best source of the fibre they like is vegetables. Asparagus, onions, garlic and artichokes are their favourites (3). Antibiotics, found in dairy milk, can kill off these healthy bacteria. Another reason to follow the vegan way of life.

The research is clear: eating healthy can boost your mood and help you stay mentally sharp. People who eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and

legumes have less chance of developing depression than those without these dietary staples!

Arachidonic acid, found only in animal products like eggs and chicken, can lead to an increase of inflammation which has been linked with lower moods as well as mental health problems such as anxiety. People who avoid foods containing this compound typically report having more positive feelings towards themselves

The enzyme arachidonate is released after we eat meat or dairy products which sparks off multiple reactions within our body. This ends up raising the level of stress hormones. If they hang around in the bloodstream, they can reach the brain which can lead to anxiety and worse (8).

Eating a vegan diet needs to be done long term to keep anxious feelings at bay. It is not an overnight fix. However, the sooner you start the sooner you will feel better. It is a compound effect over time (9). You don't need to have full-on anxiety or stress to benefit from a vegan diet. Plant based foods can simply help us concentrate and focus for longer. This means you can do your job better and have less 'sick' days (10).

One thing to watch out for with a vegan diet, is to make sure you get enough of all the nutrients you need to keep your mental health on track. Cutting out meat can lead to less Vitamin B12, choline, omega 3 fatty acids and some amino acids (which make up protein). This can lead to low mood, not being able to concentrate and depression (11).

To overcome this it is important to make sure these nutrients are provided by eating a full range of vegetables, legumes and, if necessary, supplements.

Anxiety sufferers should try adding plant-based foods rich in magnesium, vitamins C and D into their diet. These can help ease anxiety because they contain natural substances that relax the body's central nervous system which then helps calm you down!

Here are some vegan food ideas to get some of these anxiety-reducing benefits. Vitamin D has a pretty amazing effect on your mood. Foods with lots of vitamin D include mushrooms and fortified soy and nut milks. Don't forget to leave the mushrooms out on the windowsill in the sun to enhance vitamin D content (12).

Magnesium has a calming effect which can help you relax. When you are tense it can lead to anxiety and stress and poor mental health (13). For that reason it is a good idea to eat foods that are full of this relaxing nutrient. These vegan foods are spinach, edamame beans (Soy) and Swiss chard. Pumpkin and sunflower seeds, almonds and cashews also have lots of magnesium so make a good snack option. Nut butters, peas and beans are also a fantastic way to get magnesium into you (14). If you just want to relax and chill to wind down, then nibbling on a few magnesium-rich foods will have the desired effect.

The three most important nutrients for brain health and subsequently mental health are Omega 3 fatty acids, B vitamins and the amino acid tryptophan.

To get Omega 3s into a vegan diet eat walnuts, flax seeds and flax oil, hemp and chia seeds. Omega 3s help reduce inflammation in the body. Long term inflammation can lead to stress hormones being present all the time. This is not a great situation if you are susceptible to anxiety and stress (15).

Tryptophan is one of the building blocks for serotonin. This is a chemical that makes us feel better. So the more of this we can get the better. Seeds - especially pumpkin and sunflower contain tryptophan. As do leafy vegetables, soy, mushrooms and broccoli (15).

B vitamins are also involved with serotonin as well as dopamine and GABA - all feel good hormones. The best sources of these in a vegan diet is beans, legumes, lentils and bread or cereal that has these added (fortified). (16)

B vitamins can also help protect against the development of dementia which obviously affects the mind in the worst way possible.

Hopefully this information gives you another reason to try a vegan diet. If you are already convinced a vegan diet is the way forward but are not feeling your best, then you are on the right track. Wishing you good mental health!

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