



e-quilibrium

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What You Eat

A cartoon by Dan Reynolds depicts a squirrel lying on a therapists' couch lamenting, "When I learned 'you are what you eat,' I realized I was **nuts**." Might that squirrel be on to something?

There is no question that what we eat matters for our physical health. A poor diet contributes to risk and course for many illnesses. What isn't so clear, however, is whether diet contributes to risk for mental health problems.

One of the areas where a diet-behavioral link has been purported is with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Diets high in refined sugar have been suggested as being contributory to ADHD, but no consistent connection has been found. Even more prominent has been the proposal that artificial food dyes may contribute to the behavioral difficulties associated with ADHD, a matter that has been debated for over 30 years. Indeed, just this past week, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) revisited the evidence for a relationship between food dyes and ADHD. The FDA decided that warnings are not warranted on foods that contain such dyes, although the dyes may affect the behavior of some children.

Is there evidence that what we eat can affect susceptibility to depression? Earlier this year a Spanish study was published in which approximately 12,000 adults were followed for a 6-year period. Of interest was the relationship between dietary fat intake and the incidence of depression. Greater consumption of trans-fats (trans-unsaturated fatty acids) was associated with increased risk for depression. This

was a dose-response pattern in that depression risk increased as the intake of trans-fats increased. Inversely, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats appeared protective, in that ingestion of these fats was associated with lower depression risk. This, too, was a dose-response relationship. Margarine, cookies, chips, crackers, and fast foods typically are high in trans fats, whereas olive oil, seeds, nuts, and fish are sources of polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fats.

If you are like me, when I read a new study describing what behavior is good for my health, I sometimes think that here is yet another thing to remember. That's not my reaction this time, because if the results of this study are accurate, there isn't anything new to remember about a healthy diet. It looks like a diet good for one's heart is also good for one's brain. That means that following a heart-healthy diet may also be good for our moods!

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