

Food for thought – mood food

Do you ever crave specific foods when you're having a bad day? Do you get snappy when you miss meals and make do with snacks, or you 'go on a diet'? Do certain foods (or drinks) make you feel mellow?

Yes, there certainly seem to be some strong links between mood and food.

As a runner, I recognise the need for sugar, and sometimes salt, after exercise. That 'must have' feeling is a natural physiological response to depletion of my body's energy stores and electrolytes.

I have experienced an illogically similar response to the opposite situation: sitting at a desk (at work) for prolonged periods leads to a desire for something sweet (usually chocolate) when energy usage is low. It's not just me who feels this way, either; several colleagues around me will reach for the sweet stuff as the day wears on!

Needless to say, this 'must have' feeling isn't based on physiological need but rather on a desire to enhance mood. Eating sugary foods triggers a rapid rise in blood sugar and an elevation of mood as the brain gets a shot of metabolic energy and some of the pleasure centres respond. The occasional sweetie break is essentially harmless however allowing this to be the way to get through every day is bad news. Eating lots of sugary foods leads to an increased craving – the more you have, the more you want. Without going into detail, this modulation of the 'reward' effect comes from both the body's ability to regulate blood sugar and the brain's response to those blood sugar levels.

So what's the answer? There are several options. For me, varying the task, getting up and walking around the building for a few minutes or getting a hot drink will work wonders. Eating snacks that release sugar more slowly is also a sensible approach: fruit (which contains more complex sugars), cereal-containing snacks (slower release carbs) and the addition of a few nuts (providing protein and healthy fats and increasing satiety).

How to lose weight successfully is always a hot topic. There seems to be an infinite number of diets, with new ones appearing in the media every few months. Every so often, a 'new' diet will be based on the ketogenic Atkins (or low carb) diet which was first promoted in the 1950's. I've never tried it, nor would I do so, but I do have experience of a work colleague who did and another friend who switched suddenly from a high carb to a low carb diet.

There are recognised and well documented side effects of the ketogenic diets. One effect results from the body metabolising proteins to obtain energy, thereby producing ketones and placing a greatly increased load on the kidneys (this is the primary reason I would not recommend this type of diet). Another effect is mood changes. My colleague was already somewhat moody however whilst on this diet she was almost impossible to work with and on one occasion she 'flipped' when she failed to get her own way, resulting in a trip to A&E after she passed out and apparently couldn't / wouldn't regain full consciousness.

I suspect that this was an extreme reaction in a very susceptible individual however it is one end of a spectrum of mood changes that is reliably demonstrated by people who have cut their carbs down to a level that means the body has difficulty managing energy levels.

Alcohol is a very well-known influencer of mood. Moderate levels will result in euphoria and reduction in social inhibitions. Unfortunately the latter effect may counteract and outweigh the euphoric effect such that a few drinks result in tears rather than laughter.

Let's get back to my favourite mood food – chocolate. There's plenty of sugar in chocolate confectionary however I greatly prefer the dark stuff which has far less sugar. This seems to go against the blood sugar explanation of feeling good, unless there's something else coming into play?

There is a compound named anandamide found within the cacao component of chocolate which enhances mood. Anandamide is formed naturally within the brain and it will activate cannabinoid receptors. Yes, the clue is in the name, cannabinoid receptors are involved in physiological processes affecting mood. So, eating chocolate (particularly dark chocolate) increases the levels of anandamide and hence helps to elevate mood; the positive effects of chocolate originate from its sugar and anandamide content.

To sum up on a light hearted note: My 'score' in a trivial online quiz may just capture the picture for chocolate:

*The addiction you're most inclined to have is chocolate!
If there's one thing you can't live without, it's chocolate! Milk chocolate, white chocolate, dark chocolate, you love it all! And chocolate cake? Oh, there's no stopping you when it comes to chocolate cake. Studies have shown that the experience of eating chocolate results in feel good neurotransmitters (mainly dopamine - which is also released while laughing and having sex) being released in the brain. So you're not just imagining that ecstatic feeling you getting every time you bite down on a delicious chocolate bar!*

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