

## STUDIES: MENTAL ILLNESS LINKED TO UNHEALTHY DIETS

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Changes in diet over the past 50 years appear to be an important factor behind a significant rise in mental ill health in the UK, say two reports published on January 16. The Mental Health Foundation says scientific studies have clearly linked attention deficit disorder, depression, Alzheimer's disease and schizophrenia to junk food and the absence of essential fats, vitamins and minerals in industrialized diets. A further report: "Changing Diets, Changing Minds" published by Sustain, says that food can have an immediate and lasting effect on mental health and behaviour because of the way it affects the structure and function of the brain. If we don't address it and change the way we farm and fish, we may lose the means to prevent much diet-related ill-health."

Both reports, produced collaboratively, outline the growing scientific evidence linking poor diet to problems of behaviour and mood. Rates of depression have been shown to be higher in countries with low intakes of fish, for example. Lack of folic acid, omega-3 fatty acids, selenium and the amino acid tryptophan are thought to play an important role in the illness. Deficiencies of essential fats and antioxidants vitamins are also thought to be contributory factor in schizophrenia. According to Caroline Stokes, its research nutritionist, the mental health patients she saw generally had the

poorest diets she had ever come across. "They are eating lots of convenience foods, snacks, takeaways, chocolate bars, crisp. It's very common for clients to be drinking a litre or two of cola a day. A lot of them are eating only one portion of fruit or vegetable a day." The therapy includes omega-3 fatty acids and multivitamins, with advice on cutting out junk food and replacing it with oily fish, leafy vegetables for folic acid, Brazil nuts for selenium, and food providing tryptophan. Some patients who resist treatment with drugs accept nutritional therapy and report an improvement in mood and energy. Ms Stoke said, "Within the first month there's a significant reduction in depression."

One sufferer who benefited from a dietary change was James Mclean, who was at university when first diagnosed with bipolar disorder (manic depression). His father read about the role of nutrition in mental health, and the pair went to the Brain Bio- Centre in London, where Mr Mclean's nutrition level was checked; he was allergic to gluten and yeast and was given supplement,

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including vitamin B and essential fatty acids. "I'd been eating lots of intense carbohydrate foods..because they were cheap, and very little fruit or vegetables" Mr Mclean said. Now, he excludes wheat from diet too. He added: "I have more energy and confidence, I sleep better, and I came off the antipsychotic drugs, although I still take mood stabilising ones."

Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, acknowledged that mental illness results from a complex interplay of biological, social, psychological and environmental factors, but those diet should be an every day component of mental health care. *We need mentally healthy school meals and mentally healthy hospital foods.*

#### **Good for the brain**

Vegetable, especially leafy

Seeds and nuts

Fruit

Whole grains

Wheatgerm

Organic eggs

Organic farmed and wild fish, especially fatty fish

#### **Bad for Brain**

Deep fried junk foods

Refined processed foods

Pesticides

Alcohol

Sugar

Some additives

(Extracted from "The Myanmar Times, January 23-29,2006 P-19)