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## Eating well to help manage anxiety: Your questions answered

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### **Does diet affect anxiety? If so, what should I eat, and which foods should I try to avoid?**

People who suffer with anxiety should remember a few simple rules:

- Low blood sugar, poor hydration, use of alcohol, caffeine, and smoking can also precipitate or mimic symptoms of anxiety.
- Eating regular meals and preventing hypoglycemic states are therefore important.
- Adequately hydrating with plain water is best, at least six to eight glasses a day.
- While nicotine does not cause anxiety, withdrawal from nicotine can mimic anxiety, and people with anxiety may smoke to soothe themselves. It may become a problematic behavior, as nicotine can also raise blood pressure and heart rate, which are also symptoms of anxiety.
- People who feel anxiety may lean on alcohol to calm their nerves, but excessive drinking can lead to its own set of emotional and physical problems.
- Many sodas contain caffeine and have a high sugar content. Being aware of these factors and substituting plain water or sparkling water for soda can be a healthier option.
- Working toward a well-balanced diet with adequate fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and healthy fats remains a good recommendation for those who struggle with anxiety. Avoiding processed foods and foods high in sugar means the body experiences fewer highs and lows of blood sugar, which helps to further reduce feelings of anxiety. Very simply put, a sugar rush can mimic a panic attack.



For example, eating a frozen dinner and ice cream will affect you differently than eating chicken and broccoli with a pasta made from whole grains or quinoa. The second meal includes whole, unprocessed foods, and you control the amount of sugar, if any, added to the meal. It takes longer for your body to metabolize these foods, which helps you feel fuller for longer and keeps blood sugar levels steady, rather than yo-yoing up and down.

### **Does sugar increase anxiety symptoms?**

Yes! And there are many hidden sugars in the foods we eat, including savory foods. Many people don't realize this. One example is a popular store-bought tomato basil sauce. One half-cup serving (and very few people would eat just half a cup at a meal) contains 12 grams of sugar, which is 3 teaspoons (4 grams sugar = 1 teaspoon). Food labels in the US use grams, and many people do not really know how to interpret these. Recipes use ounces, pounds, teaspoons, and tablespoons, so this conversion becomes important for the consumer. So, if you used 1-1/2 cups of the pasta sauce, you would be consuming 36 grams or 9 *teaspoons* of sugar just from the sauce in your meal!

While your body needs a healthy balance of sugar, carbohydrates, fats, and proteins to function, it is also that very balance that helps keep us healthy. Consuming sugar through natural sources such as a piece of fruit, and not fruit juice or dried fruit, affects your body differently than candy or hidden sugars in your foods.

The [FDA](#) has a new nutrition label law coming into effect which will list the added sugars on the nutrition label for consumers and provide some other helpful data.

### **Do anxiety symptoms improve when you cut back on sugar and feed your body the right foods?**

It's a good idea to talk with your doctor before making dramatic changes in what you eat. Involve a nutritionist (your doctor can refer you to one) if you need some extra guidance.

As with any dietary change, your body will need some time to adjust. If you are otherwise healthy and cut back on processed sugar, you may feel your anxiety slowly improve thanks to fewer ups and downs caused by the excess sugar. If you are only using diet to combat anxiety, this change may not be obvious or immediate. You may also need to speak to a doctor about a medication. An integrated treatment approach including talk therapy, mindfulness techniques, stress relief, good sleep hygiene, and a balanced diet are all equally important parts of your care.

## What else should I know about diet and anxiety?

Anxiety is linked with many [physical illnesses](#). In addition to taking guidance from your doctor about options for treating anxiety, you should augment that treatment by paying attention to how and what you eat. A [review](#) of the literature examining the effects of diet on anxiety-related behavior highlighted that foods high in fat and/or sugar, or that are highly palatable, can affect behavior in animal models, and may do the same in humans. More human studies are needed.

Some of the following tips may be useful for you:

- eat a healthy and balanced diet along the lines of a [Mediterranean diet](#)
- cut back on sugar and processed foods
- cut back on caffeine, alcohol, and smoking cigarettes
- eat foods rich in zinc, like whole grains, oysters, kale, broccoli, legumes, and nuts
- eat foods rich in magnesium: fish, avocado, dark leafy greens
- eat foods rich in vitamin B, such as asparagus, leafy greens, meat, and avocado
- eat foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, for example, wild caught salmon
- eat probiotic-rich foods like kefir, yogurt, and other fermented foods.

Of course, first and foremost, follow the medical advice of your doctor. Discuss diet, lifestyle, and medication changes, and keep track of your symptoms to see whether they improve.

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