

Eat To Live: What you eat is how you think

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A study published this week takes the mantra "you are what you eat" one stage further: It concludes what you eat could affect how you think.

The study, Feeding Minds, was done by Sustain, a Britain-based alliance for better food and farming, in conjunction with the Mental Health Foundation. It points out that over the past 50 years the delicate balance of vitamins, minerals and essential fats we consume has altered dramatically.

The nutrients we get from consumption of meat and fowl have been changed by the processed feed, hormones, antibiotics and pesticides they are provided in industrialized farming complexes.

We eat one-third less vegetables than 50 years ago and two-thirds less fish -- our main source of omega-3 fatty acids.

The measure of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids in battery farmed chickens, vital to the function of the human brain, has altered. Their fat content has increased in 30 years from 2 percent to 22 percent.

We consume saturated fat from processed foods and ready-meals that acts to slow down the brain's working process. While doctors and scientists are skeptical of the connection it makes, the study says that these changes in our eating habits may be linked to depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia and even Alzheimer's.

The families who are members of Talk About Curing Autism would not be surprised by the findings. This support group, launched by a family with personal experience with autism, investigates any avenue that could improve life for anyone or family affected by autism.

Their firsthand experience has led many families in the autism community to agree with TACA that a diet free of gluten and casein can lessen the digestive and bowel issues sometimes found in children with autism spectrum disorder.

TACANOW.com concurs that because such a diet is considered an "alternative" therapy, "school administrators, medical personnel, and others often view it with skepticism." Those who have implemented it have also found that "for some children, eliminating gluten and casein helps lessen self-stimulating behaviors (and) increases focus."

According to a January 2005 article in Today's Dietitian by Kate Jackson, "Support for such a diet has come from recent research pointing to the presence of pathology in the gastrointestinal tracts of children with autism, the degree of which correlates to the severity of autistic symptoms. The problem is believed to be a leaky gut, and absorption difficulties are thought to influence brain function."

Gluten occurs in wheat, oats, barley, rye and most processed foods. It even appears in Play-Doh, many hygiene products and the adhesive used on stamps and stickers. Casein, or milk protein, is in all dairy products and is even used as a binder in canned tuna fish.

Even skeptics may wish to consider the influence in all individuals of diet upon brain function.

Dr. Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, said that in some cases addressing mental health problems with changes in diet showed better results than using drugs or counseling.

Rebecca Foster, a nutrition scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation, is not ready yet to draw the conclusions reached by the Sustain and Mental Health Foundation study about the association between mental illness and dietary intake.

"However," she told the BBC, "the nutrient recommendations outlined in this report are in line with recommendations for good health, which should continue to be advocated by all health professionals."

For one-dish cooking of free-range chickens and fresh vegetables, French countrywomen own wonderful deep circular terracotta pots that are wider at the top than the base. Into this they slice whatever vegetables are to hand -- onions and a little garlic are essential, carrots, turnips, potatoes, parsnips, leeks are all good. They season them, throw in 3-4 sprigs of fresh thyme. Then they lay a roasting chicken on top, salt and pepper it, slosh in a good glug or two of white wine, cover the whole well with foil and cook it in a 350 F oven for an hour and a half. Then they remove the cover, raise the heat to 400 F to allow the chicken to brown for 30 minutes before serving.

You can do the same in a lidded casserole, but because it isn't the same shape, gently soften your vegetables first in a little oil, drain them and spread over the base of the pan, then add the chicken. And add water or stock just to cover them; for a soupier meal, cover the dish and follow the previous instructions.