



Connecting Food and Mood

DO YOU CRAVE specific foods or drinks in search of comfort or an energy boost? It is no secret that common life stressors, daily responsibilities, demanding schedules or long work-days affect our mood and, at times, our nutrition. Many of us resort to comforting foods to help ease feelings of frustration, boredom, tiredness or anxiety and for most people these are sugary, high-calorie, high-fat



and highly processed foods. Sadly, these kinds of foods will only offer a temporary and nutrient deficient boost, while being detrimental to the way we feel and function on a mental health level.

A developing field of study is Nutrition Psychiatry, which is dedicated to determining the correlation between nutrition and emotional/mental health. Even though the studies and research are still relatively new, the findings by experts in the Food & Mood Centre at Deakin University are shining a light on the food and mood connection, offering us tips to make simple and realistic diet changes to overcome and manage symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and trauma.

The research reports that nutrients found in specific food groups impact not only our mood, but also our attention, focus and energy levels, while some may aggravate mental illnesses and mood disorders. In a profession like Early Childhood Education, it is vital that we prioritize the quality of life of the caregiver and the children in their care. Educators have an impact and can positively influence the parents, community and their own families by continuing to serve nutrient dense foods, balanced meals, seasonal

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Cultural Cuisines



> Puerto Rico <

Origins & Roles of Food

Puerto Rican cuisine has a variety of influences including the Caribbean Indigenous Taíno, Europe and Africa. The Taíno and Arawak people influenced the use of tropical tubers and roots. Olives resulted from the Spanish and Africa introduced coffee, coconut and varieties of bananas.

Food Customs

Food customs vary based on region. Arcibo is recognized for its heavy use of cumin and coriander seeds that give food a flavorful and smoky taste. Hatillo is well known for dairy production, especially cheeses unique to Puerto Rico. Loiza is known for its African influence, particularly the heavy use of coconut milk in sweet and savory dishes.

Staple Foods

Mofongo is made from deep-fried plantains mashed with garlic and pork, butter or oil. Savory or sweet *Tostones* and *Amarillos* are also made from plantains. Rice and beans, are the quintessential side dish, while sarsaparilla, avocado, peppers, sofrito (a blend of herbs and spices), guavas, pineapples and guanabanas are also staple foods.

Dining Etiquette

Meals are meant to be consumed in a calm manner, even if it's pausing for a cup of coffee. It's always important to greet everyone and say "Buen provecho" at each meal.

Connecting Food and Mood

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produce and perhaps even growing their own fruits, vegetables and herbs.

The recommended four food and nutrient groups that boost our mood, according to Amanda Capritto in her article *Food and Mood: How Your Diet Affects Your Mental Health*, are the following:

WHOLE GRAINS AND HIGH-FIBER FOODS

Fiber is satiating and stabilizes blood sugar; it also helps slow down the breakdown of carbohydrates during digestion which helps avoid blood sugar spikes and crashes. Whole grains are also high in B vitamins, which are known to assist in stress management.

Some of these foods are: rolled oats, quinoa, whole-grain bread, brown rice, amaranth, barley, beans and legumes, starchy vegetables (i.e. sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkin, peas), starchy fruits (i.e. apples, bananas and cantaloupe.)

ANTIOXIDANT-RICH FOODS

The main benefit of antioxidants is to protect our cells from free radicals, neutralizing these unstable molecules and reducing the chances of causing illnesses like heart disease and cancer. Low intakes of antioxidants have been linked to depression; so, to fight back, stock up on these mood boosters: berries (i.e. raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, goji berries and mulberries), dark leafy greens (i.e. spinach, arugula, kale, dandelion greens, turnip greens, collard greens and Bok choy), other vegetables (i.e. beets, asparagus, radishes, turnips, squash, artichokes, peppers), coffee, dark chocolate and spices.

FERMENTED FOODS

These foods offer generous amounts of vital probiotics, which support the health of our digestive system. Research suggests that gut health significantly impacts overall health, including our mood. Furthermore, increasing probiotics in our diet may directly increase levels of serotonin, an important neurotransmitter that regulates mood. According to a study by the Food and Mood Institute, *“Gastrointestinal disorders and mental illness often occur hand in hand. It has been found that the rate of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and other functional gastrointestinal disorders was four times higher in people with anxiety than those who don’t have anxiety. The rate of anxiety was also five times higher in people with IBS than without.”* Examples of fermented foods include: sauerkraut, kimchi, yogurt, kefir, kombucha, tempeh, miso and natto. Keep



in mind other fermented foods and beverages like bread and beer do not contain live probiotics due to filtering and cooking processes.

FOODS HIGH IN ESSENTIAL FATTY ACIDS

Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids are important because our bodies cannot produce them and they are only obtained from the foods we eat. Omega-3 has been linked to a reduced risk of depression and alleviation of depressive symptoms, while essential fatty acids may also have a positive effect on anxiety. Foods high in essential fatty acids include fatty fish (salmon, sardines, cod, herring, mackerel, rainbow trout, tuna, perch), nuts and seeds (walnuts, flax seeds, peanuts, pumpkin seeds, hazelnuts), certain oils (flaxseed oil, safflower oil, olive oil). Other sources include avocados, olives and omega-3 enriched whole eggs.

Best practices like meal planning, grocery shopping, food prepping and exploring recipe ideas will help support efforts to incorporate the “mood boosters” into your daily meals. The long-term goal is to achieve variety and balance: colorful fruit and vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, and legumes that add flavor and textures to our plates. Start small or go big but take this opportunity to influence your wellbeing since our diet is something within our control, unlike our genetics. Serve and enjoy more mood boosting foods and observe the changes to your own body and mental health as well as the effects on the children in your care!

— Alejandra Marín Santos
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CocoKids

KIDS' HEALTH & SAFETY

For Kids' Sake, Think Toy Safety

WHEN BUYING TOYS

- Choose toys with care. Keep in mind the child's age, interests and skill level.
- Look for quality design and construction.
- Make sure that all directions or instructions are clear—to you and, when appropriate, to the child. Discard plastic wrappings on toys at once.
- *Be a label reader.* Look for and heed age recommendations, such as “Not recommended for children under three.” Look for other safety labels including: “Flame retardant/Flame resistant” on fabric products and “Washable/hygienic materials” on stuffed toys and dolls.



WHEN MAINTAINING TOYS

- Check all toys periodically for breakage and potential hazards; throw away or repair immediately.
- Edges on wooden toys that might have become sharp, or surfaces with splinters should be sanded smooth. Examine all outdoor toys regularly for rust or weakness.

WHEN STORING TOYS

- Teach children to put their toys safely away on shelves or in a toy chest after playing to prevent trips and falls. Store toys used outdoors after play—rain or dew can rust or damage toys creating hazards.
- Toy boxes should be checked for safety. A toy chest should have a lid that will stay open in any position to which it is raised and will not fall unexpectedly on a child. For extra safety, be sure there are ventilation holes for fresh air. Watch for sharp edges that could cut and hinges that could pinch.

SMALL PARTS

- The law bans toys with small parts in toys intended for children under three. This includes removable small eyes and noses on stuffed toys and dolls and small removable squeakers on squeeze toys.

LOUD NOISES

- Make sure a toy isn't too loud for children. The noise of some rattles, squeak toys and musical or electronic toys can be as loud as a car horn—even louder if a child holds it directly to the ears—and can damage hearing.

CORDS AND STRINGS

- Toys with long strings or cords are dangerous for infants and very young children. The cords can become wrapped around an infant's neck, causing strangulation. Never hang toys with long strings, cords, loops or ribbons in cribs or playpens where children can become entangled.
- Remove crib gyms from the crib when the child can pull up on hands and knees; some children have strangled when they fell across crib gyms stretched across the crib.

PROPELLED OBJECTS

- Projectiles—guided missiles and similar flying toys—can be turned into weapons and injure eyes.
- Arrows or darts used by children should have soft cork tips, rubber suction cups or other protective tips intended to prevent injury. Avoid dart guns or other toys which might be capable of firing articles not intended for use in the toy, such as pencils or nails.

ELECTRIC TOYS

- Electric toys must meet mandatory requirements for maximum surface temperatures, electrical construction and prominent warning labels. Electric toys with heating elements are recommended only for children over eight years old. Children should be taught to use electric toys properly, cautiously and under adult supervision.

ALL TOYS ARE NOT FOR ALL CHILDREN

- Keep toys designed for older children out of the hands of little ones. Follow labels that give age recommendations—some toys are recommended for older children because they may be hazardous in the hands of a younger child. Teach older children to help keep their toys away from younger friends.
- Balloons, when uninflated or broken, can choke or suffocate if swallowed. More children have suffocated on uninflated balloons and pieces of broken balloons than on any other type of toy.

— U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
www.cpsc 1-800-638-2772

Pastelon (Plantain Lasagna)

Plantains, large, ripe.....	3-4	Tomato sauce	1 cup
Vegetable oil.....	3 Tbsp	Ground, lean beef or chicken ..	1 pound
Onion, chopped.....	1	Black beans, drained.....	2 (16 oz) cans
Garlic, minced	1 Tbsp	Water.....	3 Tbsp
Cumin	1 tsp	Sazón or chicken bouillon.....	1 Tbsp
Smoked paprika.....	1 tsp	Green olives, sliced	¼ cup
Cayenne.....	¼ tsp	Green onion, chopped	3
Oregano or thyme.....	1 tsp	Parsley, chopped	3 Tbsp
Coriander.....	¼ tsp	Eggs.....	3
Salt and pepper	½ tsp each	Cheese, shredded	2 cups
Bell pepper, chopped.....	1		

1. Preheat oven to 400°F. Slice off the ends of plantains. Slit a shallow cut down the long seam of the plantains and peel. Slice each plantain into 4-5 lengthwise pieces.
2. Spray a baking sheet with oil and place plantains in a single layer. Spray lightly with oil and bake 12-20 minutes, turning once, until plantains are slightly browned.
3. Add oil to a skillet and allow onion, garlic, and spices to sweat for about a minute. Add bell pepper, tomato sauce and bring to a simmer. Add ground meat, beans and continue to sauté for 7-10 minutes. Add water and sazón or chicken bouillon, olives, green onions, parsley and adjust for seasoning.
4. Spray an 8x8-inch pan with cooking spray. Line the bottom with plantains, add a layer of beef mixture; continue to alternate layer of plantains and ground meat as you would in making a lasagna.
5. In a mixing bowl, whisk the eggs and pour over the pastelon. Top with cheese and bake at 350° F for 25-30 minutes until the egg has cooked through and the cheese is bubbly.

Yield: 12 servings

Meets requirement for vegetable and meat/meat alternate.

— *Immaculate Bites*

Holiday Roasted Vegetables

Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved.....	1 pound	Rosemary leaves, chopped.....	1 tsp
Carrots, peeled and sliced into ½" pieces	2 large	Thyme leaves, chopped.....	1 tsp
Extra-virgin olive oil.....	2 Tbsp	Salt and pepper	to taste
Balsamic vinegar.....	1 Tbsp	Pecans, toasted.....	½ cup
		Dried cranberries.....	½ cup

1. Preheat oven to 400°F. Scatter vegetables on large baking sheet. Toss with oil, balsamic vinegar, rosemary and thyme. Season with salt and pepper.
2. Bake 20-25 minutes, in the top third of the oven, until the vegetable are tender, shaking the pan halfway through.
3. Before serving, toss roasted vegetables with pecans and cranberries.

Yield: 8 servings

Meets requirement for vegetable.

— *Delish.com*



Fuel & Fitness

EXERCISE FOR LEARNING

Exercise is the new prescription for ADHD (Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder). It helps manage a child's mood, improve focus, reduce anxiety and may even lead to higher test scores.

A 2022 study in Biomedical Journal concluded that children with ADHD who engaged in 20 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, achieved improved executive functioning skills. A CDC report reviewing 50 studies further indicated that physical exercise improves academic achievement.

Make exercise a *before school* and *pre-homework* habit to positively impact children's academic performance.



Mindful exercise breaks are also important. Feel your attention waning? A couple minutes of jumping jacks and three slow breaths are prescribed.



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Food Q. What does a gingerbread man sleep with at night?
Funny A. A cookie sheet!