

# Wellbeing Protective Factors: Eating Habits

## Why eating habits matter

Discover how balanced eating habits act as a wellbeing protective factor. We explain some simple food choices and strategies to help support mental and physical health.



## The role of balanced eating in feeling mentally and physically well

We all know that what we eat can impact our physical health. But did you know there is increasing evidence that food and drink can also affect our mental health?

Alongside sleep and exercise, when we eat regular, balanced meals, we're more likely to have steady energy, clearer thinking that supports greater mental and physical health. On the flip side, unbalanced eating and drinking patterns can make mental health symptoms worse.

Here we look at how your eating habits can be a wellbeing protective factor and how they can improve your mental health.

## What are wellbeing protective factors?

Wellbeing protective factors are the habits, supports and activities in our lives that help us stay in the green zone.

They include things like:

- Healthy eating patterns
- Regular sleep and exercise
- Strong social connections
- Work life balance

When we work on these factors, it can help us stay in a place where life is good rather than where life feels tough. These wellbeing protective factors don't mean you'll never face challenges. But they make it easier to cope and maintain balance when things go wrong.



# How eating habits affect wellbeing

There are a few elements to building healthy eating habits.

## 1 Eat a balanced diet

A balanced diet includes:

- A variety of fruit, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains
- Sources of protein such as fish, chicken, eggs, red meat, tofu and dairy foods
- Fats that support your brain and body, such as those found in nuts, seeds, olive oil and avocado
- Hydrating fluids such as water; and
- Foods that bring you comfort, pleasure and joy, satisfaction is a part of nourishment!

See the [Australian Guide for Healthy Eating](#) for more ideas.



## 2 Eat regularly

When you don't eat regularly, it can cause your blood sugar to drop, leading you to feel tired and bad-tempered. You're also more likely to grab a convenience snack rather than a nutritious meal.

Eating consistently helps regulate mood and maintain balanced eating habits. You could start with regular meal dates with friends or family members. Share the responsibilities around so you can prepare the meal together before you sit down and eat.

## 3 Avoid processed foods

Processed foods and refined carbohydrates can raise your blood sugar levels too quickly, causing quick energy spikes and then a slump.

When you can, pair foods like lollies, biscuits and chips with something like fruit, whole-grain snacks and nuts to support sustainable energy levels through out your day.



## 4 Limit or avoid caffeine and alcohol

Caffeine is a stimulant and is in coffee, most teas, chocolate, cola and energy drinks. It's addictive, can impact sleep patterns and can make some people feel more anxious.

On the other hand, alcohol is a depressant. Drinking too much increases your risk of some mental health conditions and can impair your judgement. It's also addictive and can become a dependence, particularly in people with depression and anxiety.

While both substances are okay in moderation, people can find when life is getting rough, they rely on alcohol or caffeine more. To stay in the green zone, keep your consumption in check and seek support if you feel you are reliant.



## 5 Eat mindfully

Mindful eating is when we pay attention to our hunger and fullness cues and focus on the meal experience. The opposite is mindless eating, which is associated with anxiety, overeating and weight gain.

Instead of eating your meal in front of a screen, sit at the dinner table with friends or by yourself without distractions. Try to eat slowly, purposefully and savour each delicious bite.



## Start slowly with your eating habits

Balanced eating as a protective wellbeing factor doesn't develop overnight. Stress, cost and time pressures can make it hard to get started and maintain.

Balanced eating habits aren't about perfection. However, when you focus on small, consistent choices, you can strengthen both your physical and mental wellbeing and feel better.

### References:

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