



ASK THE EXPERTS

Don't suffer in silence – our wellbeing wonder-team of experts is on hand to answer your health questions

I suffer from anxiety. Are there any foods I can eat that might help?

Louise Blanchfield, a nutritional therapist (nutritionist-resource.org.uk), says:

Anxiety can be relieved by boosting the levels of the inhibitory neurotransmitter gamma-amino butyric acid (GABA) which has a relaxing effect on the brain. Foods that can be made into GABA include beans, almonds, mackerel, lentils and oats. Magnesium is a mineral that can ease anxiety and green leafy vegetables as well as nuts and seeds are a good source. Theanine, found in green tea, also helps to promote relaxation – two to three cups a day will get you the maximum benefits.

Balancing your blood sugar is important too and the following tips can help you to do so:

- Stick to a regular eating pattern and don't skip meals
- Include protein with every meal
- Eat low sugar fruits on their own and high sugar ones with a handful of nuts
- Avoid fizzy drinks, cakes, biscuits, sweets, chocolate and fruit juice
- Eat whole foods such as brown rice, wholemeal bread, vegetables, meat, nuts, seeds and fish

I'm thinking of going vegan. Will it help me to lose weight and improve my health?

Dr Sally Norton, an NHS weight loss consultant (sallynorton.co.uk), says:

Veganism can be a really healthy way of eating if undertaken properly. In fact, studies show that vegetarian (including vegan) populations tend to be less overweight and are less likely to suffer from diabetes, heart disease, some cancers and more, and therefore live longer.

However, going vegan as a quick weight loss method isn't recommended as it takes care to ensure a fully balanced diet and avoid missing out on essentials like calcium, iron and vitamin B12. Also, some useful nutrients are easier to obtain from animal products than plant-based sources so you may need to consume larger quantities of the latter to get the same benefits.

It's important to be aware that a lot of foods that seem vegan may actually contain small amounts of gelatine, dairy or other animal products so read labels carefully. Be wary of food manufacturers that are jumping on the bandwagon and cashing in on people prepared to pay more for vegan foods that are processed and may not actually be healthier at all.

For any diet to produce long-term weight loss or better health, it has to be sustainable, so there's little point in adopting veganism unless you're really motivated and committed. Be sure to do it carefully, stay active and don't throw things like portion control out of the window.

What is the gut microbiota and how can it affect my mood and wellbeing?

Vera Martins, a herbalist at the College of Naturopathic Medicine (naturopathy-uk.com), says:

The gut microbiota is the community of microorganisms living in our gut. We now know that stress not only affects the microbiota, but that the microbiota impacts our stress response in a two-way communication – the so-called gut-brain-axis. Gut bacteria can send chemical messages to the brain through the secretion of neurotransmitters, affecting conditions such as anxiety and depression. More than 50 percent of irritable bowel syndrome sufferers, who typically have a disturbed microbiota, present mood disorders.

You can keep your gut microbiota balanced by supporting the growth of friendly bacteria. Opt for organic produce and include fibre from vegetables in your diet, as well as fermented foods (e.g. sauerkraut and kefir) and prebiotic options (e.g. onions, garlic and leeks). Consume herbs such as cinnamon, oregano and pau d'arco, and avoid caffeine, sugar, alcohol and smoking.