

How Mental Health Is Connected to Diet, Especially for Men

5 MIN READ

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New research finds that restrictive diets may be linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms, especially in men

When we think about eating for health, most of us imagine leafy greens, smaller portions, and cutting carbs or sugar. For decades, “discipline” has been sold as a virtue at the table. But what if that discipline is backfiring, not on your waistline, but on your mental well-being?

A **new analysis** of nearly 30,000 adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) finds that calorie-restrictive and nutrient-restrictive diets may be linked to *higher* levels of depressive symptoms, especially in men and people with a higher body mass index (BMI).

Let’s break down what the research says, and what it means for your healthspan.

Mental Health Is Linked to What You Eat

Unlike short-term weight-loss trials with supervised meal plans, this study looked at the real eating habits of everyday Americans between 2007 and 2018. Participants reported whether they were following a calorie-restrictive, nutrient-restrictive (like low-carb or low-fat), or medically guided diet (like DASH or diabetic). Researchers then assessed depressive symptoms using the well-validated PHQ-9 questionnaire.

The key finding: People on a calorie-restricted diet scored *higher* on depression scales than those not on any diet. Overweight individuals on calorie- or nutrient-restrictive diets had the greatest increase in symptoms, particularly somatic ones like low energy and poor sleep.

Men on any restrictive diet were especially affected. Compared to women not on a diet, men following nutrient-restricted eating plans had significantly higher *cognitive-affective symptoms*, low mood, loss of pleasure, and difficulty concentrating.

“Diets low in carbohydrates or fats, nutrients that include glucose and omega-3s, may deprive the brain of what it needs to regulate mood,” say researchers.

Where Metabolic Health Meets Mental Health

This research doesn't mean all dietary changes are bad. Nutrient-dense diets like the Mediterranean or MIND diet are still associated with better cognitive outcomes. But it *does* highlight a critical truth: Restriction without personalization can be harmful, especially for those with higher nutritional demands, like men or individuals with larger bodies.

Real-world dieting often lacks the support and nutrient balance of clinical studies. That means:

- ■ Protein and micronutrient deficiencies may creep in.
- ■ Weight loss may not occur, or may be cyclical, leading to frustration and physiological stress.
- ■ The psychological toll of dieting itself may go unaddressed.

5 Ways to Nourish Your Body and Mind

Instead of cutting calories or whole food groups, shift your mindset toward *nutrient*

sufficiency and mental resilience.

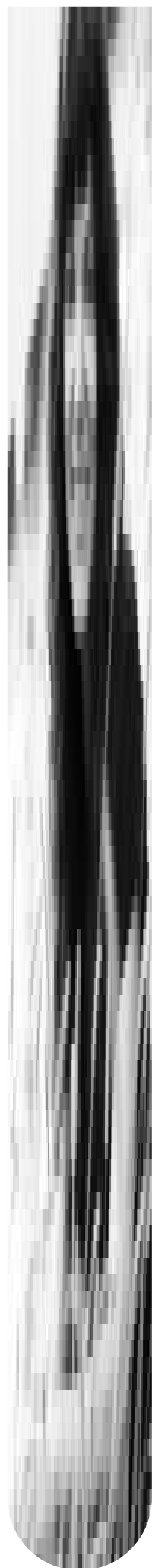
Here's how:

1. **1 Eat for brain health:** Prioritize omega-3s (from fish, flax, or algae), complex carbs (sweet potatoes, legumes), and B vitamins (leafy greens, eggs). These nutrients support mood regulation and cognitive clarity.
2. **2 Ditch the “diet” identity:** Rather than labeling your eating as “low-this” or “anti-that,” focus on eating patterns that support energy, satisfaction, and mood. If it's sustainable, it's likely healthier.
3. **3 Track how food makes you feel, not just how it makes you look.** Journal your mood, sleep, and energy levels for a week alongside meals. You might notice that the way you eat affects more than your weight.
4. **4 Watch out for symptoms of restriction-related depression:** Low energy, disrupted sleep, irritability, and apathy are red flags. If they worsen after dietary changes, it may be time to reassess.
5. **5 Men, don't ignore the signals:** The research showed men are particularly vulnerable to the emotional fallout of restrictive eating because they have a higher baseline need for calories and nutrients.

Restrictive diets may promise health, but for many people, especially men and those with higher BMIs, they could be quietly undermining mental well-being. The better approach? One that nourishes both body *and* brain. Longevity is about finding the right nutrients, the right balance, and the right support to help you thrive.

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