

Sugar and Anxiety: Forever Friends



Anxiety is a very common health condition that can be either supported or exacerbated by the food we eat. In recent times, avoiding sugar and choosing a diet rich in wholefoods has become a leading recommendation by health professionals as part of the treatment for anxiety.

It is important to understand that whilst our cells need sugar to make energy, it is the package they come in that will determine whether they will be harmful or beneficial. To make it easier to understand, let's take a step by step look at what happens in the body after sugar enters:

1. Complex carbohydrates (such as nuts, grains and seeds) break down slowly to produce a valuable steady stream of simple sugars.
2. Simple carbohydrates (found in dairy products, processed and refined foods) break down very quickly, causing a harsh surge in blood sugar.
3. This quick rise in blood sugar causes the release of dopamine and serotonin (the happy neurotransmitters) into the bloodstream, which explains the temporary lift in our mood. BUT wait there's more....
4. Too much sugar in the blood irritates the blood vessels and can lead to inflammation and potential damage, so in response to this the pancreas goes into fix it mode flooding the blood with insulin to remove the sugars. This results in a dip in blood sugar known as hypoglycemia. Light-headedness, fatigue and irritability follows. Still more....
5. Now the adrenal glands come in to play, responding to the now drop in blood sugars by releasing the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol, which act to release stored sugar from the liver in order to increase our blood sugar levels, yet again.

6. We then experience the fight or flight effects of cortisol and adrenalin such as nervousness, heart palpitations, panic, phobias and mood swings.
7. Another sharp drop in blood sugar follows and the cycle continues, eventually leading to exhaustion and adrenal fatigue.

Many people live in this cycle every day, experiencing highs and lows that can lead to anxiety, not realising the effect their food choices are having.

How can we help to prevent these highs and lows?

1. Choose to eat complex carbohydrates from whole foods.
2. If you choose to snack on chocolate, fruit or berries eat them together with nuts or seeds as the protein and fibre will slow the breakdown and absorption of these simple sugars.
3. When snacking, switch sweet for savoury where you can.

So next time you find yourself craving the sweet stuff, why not try a handful of nuts and seeds instead for a more steady body and mind.

Enjoy your week in the kitchen,

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Read more about how to support stress and anxiety with a balanced wholefood diet.