Food for Thought: Nutrition Can Improve Depression, Dementia Symptoms

New research, released earlier this year at the American Psychiatric Association’s annual meeting, shows just how significantly what we eat can impact how we feel.

Scientists have compiled a sliding scale of plant-based foods and animal products that can affect brain health, including depression and dementia.

The scale includes omega-3 fatty acids, magnesium, calcium, fiber and vitamins B1, B9, B12, D and E. Those wanting to improve the symptoms of depression or ward off dementia should up the intake of leafy green vegetables, nuts and fish and other types of seafood. When it comes to meat, researchers recommend grass-fed and pastured animals.

While these studies have focused on depression and dementia, researchers at the event said new trials are exploring the impact of nutrition on attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and addictions.

“What’s exciting about that is that it helps give the psychiatric community and our patients another set of tools in terms of treating and preventing mental illness,” session speaker Drew Ramsey, MD, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry, Columbia University, told Medscape Medical News.

The presentation also provided a brief look at a clinical trial in Australia, in which 176 patients with major depressive episodes were given diets rich in many of these nutrients. While it likely will be later in the year before the results are published, the speakers at the APA event said they envisioned that the research would be “better than expected.”

This latest effort joins a growing body of evidence that shows how diet can affect brain health positively—and negatively. Caffeine, sugar, saturated fats and highly processed foods can make symptoms of depression worse.

Other foods, such as asparagus, avocados, berries, garlic, oats and bananas are shown to reduce stress, according to Prevention magazine. And yes, dark chocolate is also on that list. It has been shown to increase serotonin and endorphin levels—improving moods. But we didn’t need scientific research to prove that, did we?