

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

MooDFOOD
PREVENTING DEPRESSION THROUGH FOOD

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This policy brief aims to set out the main findings of the MooDFOOD project and disseminate policy recommendations for the prevention of depression through food.

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INTRODUCTION

Depression is one of the most disabling disease states and affects over 7% of the European population each year, which equates to over 30 million people. It accounts for up to 50% of long-term work absence. The growing burden of depression is a major challenge to all European health systems and poses high personal, social and economic costs.

MooDFOOD is a research project funded by the European Commission within the 7th Framework Program. Its objective was to investigate the potential of food in reducing the risk of depression within the general population. To achieve this the MooDFOOD consortium has conducted new experimental research and undertaken extensive overviews of available evidence into the potential of food groups, dietary patterns, individual nutrients, nutritional supplements and food related behaviours such as mindful eating to prevent depression.

This research has led to the development of evidence based conclusions and nutritional recommendations to encourage European Member states to improve nutrition and mental health.

MooDFOOD's findings have great potential to support current policy initiatives promoting nutritious, environmentally sustainable diets within the European Union, reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases and supporting mental health.

Note: *This policy brief relates only to the prevention of depression. It does not cover the treatment of depression.*



KEY FACTS

- Over 30 million people in the EU suffer from depression.
- The financial burden of mood disorders is estimated at €170 billion every year.
- MooDFOOD's conclusions identify food as a modifiable risk factor for preventing depression.
- Following a healthy dietary pattern, consistent with national dietary guidelines, may help reduce depressive symptoms to support mental health in the general population.

The additional benefit that complying with current nutrition guidelines may support mental health should be promoted.

EVIDENCE ON THE ROLE OF FOOD IN THE PREVENTION OF DEPRESSION

Results of MoodFOOD's research, and wider research on role of food in the prevention of depression, were integrated and translated into the following conclusions:

DIETARY PATTERNS: Based on meta-analyses of prospective cohort studies there is evidence that eating a healthy dietary pattern may help to reduce depressive symptoms in the general population. Healthy dietary patterns found to be beneficial in improving mental health are consistent with current national dietary guidelines in Europe. These dietary patterns include regular intake of vegetables, fruits, legumes, fish, wholegrain breads and cereals, dairy products, nuts and healthy oils – and limited intake of red and processed meats as well as alcohol. The MoodFOOD trial also confirmed that a healthy dietary pattern with lower intakes of red and processed meat is compatible with sustainability goals. Fish recommendations need to take sustainability issues into account.

FOOD GROUPS: There is evidence that regular intake of vegetables, fruits and vegetables may help prevent depression and reduce depressive symptoms. There are currently too few studies to draw conclusion on the association of sugar and refined grains as well as junk/fast food on the onset of depression.

STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE

These conclusions are primarily based on evidence from meta-analyses of prospective observational studies including large scale European cohorts. Where it is stated there is 'strong' evidence the conclusions are based on meta-analyses of randomised controlled trials.

WEIGHT LOSS: Weight loss trials as well as bariatric surgery trials provide strong evidence that weight loss reduces depressive symptoms in people with obesity.

NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS: Strong evidence does not support the use of any nutritional supplements for the prevention of depression.

FOOD RELATED BEHAVIOUR: Though there is currently too few studies to draw firm conclusions, there are promising indications that food related behavioural strategies, such as mindful eating, may help reduce depressive symptoms.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

MoodFOOD's integrated conclusions identify diet as a modifiable risk factor for the prevention of depression. This has important policy implications for primary health care and national nutrition policy.

PRIMARY HEALTH CARE LEVEL: It is essential that these findings do not replace current treatment guidelines as presentation with depressive symptoms is a crucial point for referring patients to appropriate mental health services. Instead, the findings provide additional support for encouraging all EU citizens to follow a healthy dietary pattern. This is particularly important for people with obesity as following a healthy dietary pattern can help achieve weight loss which has also been found to help reduce depressive symptoms. Findings do not support the prescription of nutritional supplements for the prevention of depression. Of note: in patients with clinical depression promoting a healthy dietary pattern may also be beneficial as adjunct to appropriate mental health care.

NATIONAL NUTRITION POLICY: Findings provide additional support for current national dietary guidelines and non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention initiatives. While these guidelines commonly state the benefits of compliance include reduced risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, MoodFOOD's findings provide evidence to support the additional benefit of

'mental health support'. This is an important finding as mental health is increasingly recognised as playing a role in population health and can be an additional motivator to support policies which aim to promote behavioural change and create healthy food environments at the population level. Findings also demonstrate the benefits of adhering to and promoting healthy dietary patterns in supporting environmental sustainability policy directives.

NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH POLICY: While the role of diet in the prevention of depression is relevant, it should not detract from current mental health policy.

FUTURE POTENTIAL: Strengthened action and advocacy on the role of healthy dietary patterns in the prevention of depression is needed. Europe is in a unique position to lead on double-duty actions to improve diet quality and mental health.

MoodFOOD was led by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and involved a multi-disciplinary consortium of 14 European organisations.

For more information visit www.moodfood-vu.eu