

Higher Fruit and Vegetable Intake Linked to Better Mental Health in Children

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Higher fruit and vegetable intake is associated with better mental health in secondary schoolchildren, while a nutritious breakfast and lunch is linked to emotional wellbeing in children across the age spectrum, according to new research published in the journal *BMJ Nutrition Prevention & Health*.

Poor mental health is a major issue for young people, with survey data indicating that its prevalence is rising. The evidence suggests that teen mental health problems often persist into adulthood, leading to poorer life outcomes and achievement.

For the study, researchers drew on responses from over 50 schools in Norfolk, England, to The Norfolk Children and Young People Health and Wellbeing Survey 2017. In total, 10,853 children completed the survey on their mental health and nutrition, with 9 percent of primary school children in the target age groups (9 to 11 years old). Dietary questions aimed to explore fruit and vegetable intake, as well as type of breakfast and lunch eaten, alcohol intake, eligibility for free school meals, and satisfaction with weight.

Background and general health information was also collected, as well as a range of other factors, ranging from whether they had their own bedroom and bed to whether they felt safe at school and at home, including whether they had witnessed violence or arguing at home. Mental health was assessed using validated age-appropriate measures.

Data from 7,570 secondary school and 1,253 primary school children were included in the final analysis. The average mental health score was 46.6 out of 70 for secondary school pupils and 46 out of 60 for primary school pupils. Around one in four (25 percent) secondary school children and 28.5 percent of primary school pupils reported eating the recommended five portions of fruit and veg a day, with 10 percent and 9 percent, respectively, eating none.

Around one in five (21 percent) secondary school pupils and one in eight (12 percent) primary school pupils consumed only a non-energy drink or nothing at all for breakfast, while around one in eight secondary school children (11.5 percent) ate no lunch.

Higher combined fruit and vegetable intake was significantly associated with higher mental health scores—the higher the intake, the higher was the score. Compared with secondary school children eating no fruits or vegetables, eating one or two daily portions was associated with a score 1.42 units higher, while eating three or portions was associated with a score 2.34 units higher. Eating five or more portions was associated with a score 3.73 units higher.

This is an observational study, and as such, can't establish cause, added to which there was no detailed nutritional information in the survey data and the study relied on children's subjective assessments. However, the researchers said the study adds to prior evidence the finding that nutrition is relevant to childhood mental wellbeing.

About the Author:



Katherine Shagoury is the editor of Integrative Practitioner. She brings a decade of experience creating and managing content for national healthcare audiences as a digital editor and professional journalist, including serving as managing editor for a popular medical billing and coding association and as a reporter for the Boston Globe, Boston.com, and USA Today. A certified personal trainer and nutrition coach with the National Academy of Sports Medicine, a certified group fitness instructor with the Athletics and Fitness Association of America, a certified barre instructor, and a TRX qualified trainer, her passion for and commitment to healthy living fuels her enthusiasm for supporting the integrative healthcare community.