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Opinion: Good nutrition is more than just food for thought

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We must not forget that a whole foods diet is not only good for the body, it's good for the brain, says columnist.

POSTMEDIA

Re: Bradshaw et al, “Healthiest diets include meat” (Dec. 8, Calgary Herald):

Kudos to the Canadian Clinicians for Therapeutic Nutrition. They described their use of whole-food nutritional strategies to help combat the burden of chronic non-communicable disease in their patients, which they suggested was more important than focusing on meat versus plant-based foods. Their essay was an excellent reminder of why excluding processed foods is the first step toward improved physical health. However, it is also important to draw attention to the value of a whole-foods diet for brain health. Given that at least 20 per cent of our population is now diagnosed with a mental disorder, compared to less than one per cent in 1960, we must not neglect the importance of nutrition “above the neck.”

Much scientific research in the past 20 years has converged on the importance of moving our population toward eating a whole-foods diet to prevent and treat mental illness. At least 12 population-based epidemiologic studies from countries like Japan and the U.S. found that eating a whole-foods diet was correlated with fewer mood and anxiety symptoms. In one Alberta study, this relationship was found in children in Grade 6: the better the diet, the fewer reports of being worried or sad. In another Canadian study of adults already diagnosed with a mood disorder, nutrient analyses of their diets over just a three-day period revealed that intakes of 13 of the 14 minerals and vitamins evaluated were significantly correlated with a measure of overall mental functioning.

Prospective studies are required to prove that diet quality is the cause of the mental symptoms and not vice versa. Two studies from Spain and Australia have proven exactly that: in both adolescents and adults, the extent to which people followed a whole-foods, Mediterranean type of diet (few processed foods, but high in fruits, vegetables, fish, lean meat, whole grains, nuts, seeds, dairy) predicted who would develop a mood or anxiety disorder two to six years later.

Stronger proof of the causal relationship emerged last year when two separate randomized controlled trials demonstrated that adults with major depression who were taught how to improve their diet experienced reduced depression. In one study, 32 per cent of the participants actually went into remission in just 12 weeks. (If this had been a new antidepressant drug, it would have been on the cover of Time magazine.)

Another way to study the relationship between nutrients and mental health is to use nutritional supplements. At least eight randomized controlled trials worldwide have shown that people in the general population experience decreased stress and improved resilience when given a daily B complex. This finding is especially strong for populations under stress from natural disasters such as the 2010-2011 earthquakes in New Zealand. In 2013 we obtained the same result with people who participated in our randomized trial after the southern Alberta flood: taking either B complex or a broad spectrum of minerals and vitamins resulted in more than a 50 per cent decrease in depression, anxiety and stress in only six weeks.

In addition, more than 35 peer-reviewed studies have shown that supplementing with a broad spectrum of approximately 30 minerals and vitamins reduces certain types of symptoms across all ages and many psychiatric diagnostic categories. Symptoms most consistently ameliorated are mood dysregulation, explosive rage, ADHD, irritability and aggression. There is a financial imperative to pay attention to this research: in two publications of extensively documented cases, health economists showed that nutrient treatment cost less than 10 per cent of the patients' previous (and ineffective) conventional care.

None of the above information should be surprising, as the mechanisms by which nutrients optimize brain function are well understood. They serve as cofactors, enabling enzymes to do their work; they control the supply of ATP, the energy molecule produced in the mitochondria in every cell of our bodies; and by influencing ATP production, they help moderate chronic inflammation, now known to be associated with mood disorders.

It is time for every mental health clinic and every family physician's office to educate their clients about the importance of eating a whole-foods diet, and to teach them how to do it.

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