Bipolar Disorder and Nutrition

Increase your Omega 3 fats

The richest dietary source is from fish, specifically carnivorous cold water fish, such as salmon, mackerel and herring. Surveys have shown that the more fish the population of a country eats the lower is their incidence of depression. In one study estimating the various illnesses linked with low levels of omega 3 fatty acids, bipolar disorder came out on top as the number 1 illness most associated with lack of omega 3 essential fatty acids.

There have been six double-blind placebo controlled trials of omega-3’s and depression to date, five of which show significant improvement. The first trial by Dr Andrew Stoll from Harvard Medical School, published in the Archives of General Psychiatry, gave 40 depressed patients either omega 3 supplements versus placebo and found a highly significant improvement. The next, published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, tested the effects of giving twenty people suffering from severe depression, who were already on anti-depressants but still depressed, a highly concentrated form of omega 3 fat, called ethyl-EPA versus a placebo. By the third week the depressed patients were showing major improvement in their mood, while those on placebo were not. The latest trial by Dr Sophia Frangou from the Institute of Psychiatry in London gave a concentrated form of EPA, versus placebo, to 26 depressed people with bipolar disorder and again found a significant improvement. This may be because omega 3s help to build your brain’s neuronal connections as well as the receptor sites for neurotransmitters; therefore, the more omega-3s in your blood, the more serotonin you are likely to make and the more responsive you become to its effects.

Side effects? In some earlier studies which gave 14 fish oil capsules a day mild gastrointestinal discomfort, mainly loose bowels. However, nowadays you can buy more concentrated EPA rich fish oils so the amount of actual fish oil required is less. Supplementing fish oils also reduces risk for heart disease, reduces arthritic pain and may improve memory and concentration.

Balance your blood sugar

There is a direct link between mood and blood sugar balance. All carbohydrate foods are broken down into glucose and your brain runs on glucose. The more uneven your blood sugar supply the more uneven your mood.

Eating lots of sugar is going to give you sudden peaks and troughs in the amount of glucose in your blood; symptoms that this is going on include fatigue, irritability, dizziness, insomnia, excessive
sweating (especially at night), poor concentration and forgetfulness, excessive thirst, depression and crying spells, digestive disturbances and blurred vision. Since the brain depends on an even supply of glucose it is no surprise to find that sugar has been implicated in aggressive behaviour, anxiety, and depression, and fatigue.

Lots of refined sugar and refined carbohydrates (meaning white bread, pasta, rice and most processed foods,) is also linked with depression because these foods not only supply very little in the way of nutrients but they also use up the mood enhancing B vitamins; turning each teaspoon of sugar into energy needs B vitamins. Sugar also uses up other important nutrients.

The best way to keep your blood sugar level even is to eat what is called a low Glycemic Load (GL) diet and avoid, as much as you can, refined sugar and refined foods, eating instead whole foods, fruits, vegetables, and regular meals. There are a number of books that explain the low-GL diet in detail including the Holford Low GL Diet Bible. Caffeine also has a direct effect on your blood sugar and your mood and is best kept to a minimum, as is alcohol.

Side effects? If you are diabetic and taking medication to help your blood glucose control, you should keep a close eye on your blood glucose levels as your need for medication may reduce.

Up your Magnesium

Magnesium is a mineral that helps maintain normal muscle and nerve function, keep heart rhythm steady, support a healthy immune system and keep bones strong. Some indications of deficiency of magnesium are: muscle tremors or spasm, muscle weakness, insomnia or nervousness, high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, constipation, fits or convulsions, hyperactivity, depression, confusion and lack of appetite. Magnesium is interesting in bipolar disorder because of its chemical similarity to lithium (lithium being the drug most commonly used as a mood stabiliser). In fact, there is some evidence that the drug lithium may attach to the places inside the cell where magnesium is supposed to attach. In studies (Chouinard, Giannini), some people with bipolar disorder or other psychiatric illnesses had differences in the amounts of magnesium in their blood. There have been some studies where magnesium was added to other treatments to stop symptoms of mania or rapid cycling. Magnesium can block the entry of too much calcium into cells (it is a natural calcium channel blocker) which may explain why it is helpful with some symptoms of illnesses. Magnesium’s role in supporting good sleep may also be quite important here, since many people with bipolar disorder experience increasingly poor sleep patterns preceding a manic episode.

Side effects? Magnesium may lower blood pressure in people with high blood pressure. If you already take medication for your blood pressure, keep a close eye on your blood pressure as your doctor may need to lower your dose.