The Five Worst Food for Bipolar Disorder

Can an unhealthy diet play a role in triggering bipolar mood swings? Yes, according to recent research. In fact, certain foods — such as caffeine and sugar — can make bipolar disorder harder to manage overall.

“While there has been some speculation regarding specific diets for bipolar disorder, simply eating a healthy, balanced diet is an important start,” says Jess G. Fiedorowicz, MD, an assistant professor of psychiatry in the departments of psychiatry and epidemiology at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

If you choose to eliminate bipolar-offending foods from your diet, you’ll do more than keep mood swings in check and reduce periods of mania: You’ll also improve your heart health. This is important because bipolar disorder increases your risk of heart and vascular disease.

Experts believe the link may be due to the fact that people with bipolar disorder tend to be:

- Less likely to eat at least three servings of fruits and vegetables daily
- More likely to eat only one meal a day
- Less likely to cook or shop for healthy foods

Other explanations could include medication side effects, inadequate exercise, smoking, and lack of access to care, explains Dr. Fiedorowicz.

Foods and Drinks to Ditch

The fundamentals of a healthy diet include not just what to eat, but also what not to eat. You should skip these foods and beverages that can worsen bipolar symptoms.

- **Caffeine.** “Stimulants can trigger mania and should be avoided,” Fiedorowicz says. “Caffeine is an under-appreciated trigger and can additionally impair sleep,” and sleep deprivation is a notorious trigger for bipolar mood swings and mania. Caffeine can also worsen anxiety, which tends to go hand in hand with bipolar disorder and, if you’re taking antipsychotic medications, might also affect how those drugs work. Fiedorowicz adds that some over-the-counter medications — such as pseudoephedrine, found in some cough and cold
medications, for instance — have stimulant properties similar to caffeine and can also trigger bipolar mood swings.

- **Alcohol.** Alcohol and bipolar disorder make a bad combination. Alcohol can negatively affect bipolar mood swings and also may interact negatively with medications. People with bipolar disorder are also more likely to become addicted to alcohol and other substances.

- **Sugar.** People with bipolar disorder are at risk for metabolic syndrome, which is a group of risk factors that raises your risk of heart disease and diabetes. Metabolic syndrome can also make it hard for your body to manage blood sugar levels, and when your blood sugar swings between highs and lows, it could add to bipolar mood swings, particularly mania. If you really want a sweet treat, eat a piece of fruit instead.

- **Salt.** If you’re on lithium, moderating salt can be tricky because a change in salt intake, either an increase or a sudden decrease, can affect lithium levels. Talk to your doctor about how to safely manage the salt in your diet to stay within a healthy range, often between 1,500 and 2,300 milligrams a day. Equally important when taking lithium is to make sure to drink enough fluids — dehydration could cause dangerous side effects, Fiedorowicz cautions.

- **Fat.** Fiedorowicz suggests following the recommendations of the American Heart Association for a healthy diet in order to limit saturated fat and trans fat in your diet. That means choosing lean protein and low-fat dairy products. You might have heard that the fat in foods could alter the way your body uses medications. Generally, your medications will still be effective, but eating a lot of fried, fatty foods just isn’t good for your heart.

Building the best diet often takes teamwork — including help from your medical team. If your diet and lifestyle need a complete makeover, reach out to your doctor or dietitian for help.