

THE ROLE OF ALMONDS IN GOOD NUTRITION FOR PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

By Nicole Dynan and Holly Edstein, Accredited Sports Dietitians

[@the.guthealthdietitian](#)

[@thehollysticdietitian](#)

THE ROLE OF DIET IN OPTIMISING MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Recent research has uncovered a link between diet quality and mental health. Diets high in ultra-processed packaged foods are linked to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, while diets rich in plants, fibre and unsaturated 'good' fats have been shown to reduce the symptoms of depression. This has implications for the health and wellbeing of all Australians, including adults, children, athletes and workplace teams.

WHERE DO ALMONDS FIT IN?

Almonds are a nutrient powerhouse and can boost the quality of any diet. They contain protein, zinc, vitamin E, unsaturated fats, polyphenols and fermentable dietary fibres that have prebiotic benefits. **Prebiotics** feed beneficial bacteria and help them to:

- **promote a healthy gut**
- **reduce inflammation**
- **improve absorption of nutrients**
- **improve immunity, and**
- **regulate mood**

Almonds have been shown to promote these prebiotic benefits (1) and contribute to a diet rich in plant diversity that supports mental health and wellbeing.

IMPACT OF ALMONDS ON EXERCISE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Maintaining an active lifestyle can increase our 'happy hormone', serotonin, helping to regulate anxiety (2). The addition of almonds to our diet can add to the mood boosting effect of physical activity, while also helping to boost our energy and manage appetite.

A large study found that physical activity can prevent depression, while a lack of physical activity can cause depression. Swapping sedentary behaviour like sitting or lying down with just fifteen minutes of high intensity exercise or sixty minutes of moderate activity can reduce depression risk by 26% (3).



Recent restrictions to structured exercise like school and club sports make it crucial for all Australians to find alternative options like going for walks or riding a bike. Similarly, the shift to working more from home may mean a reduction in incidental activity; so, establishing a new exercise routine is key to ongoing physical and mental wellbeing.

PLAYING SPORT IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY

Research has found that athletes are at greater risk of experiencing psychological distress than the general community (4). High-pressure environments where sporting success can be dictated by the smallest of margins can add stress to managing life within and outside of sport. COVID-19 has added to this vulnerability, as athletes are forced to adapt their goals and manage ongoing uncertainty around when they will compete again. Consequently, it is important that athletes pay close attention to their diet to assist in optimising their mental health.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

Simple ways to enjoy your daily dose of almonds include:

1. Sprinkle them on top of your morning oats.
2. Spread almond butter on a piece fruit for a mid-morning snack.
3. Blend into your favourite fruit smoothie.
4. Add some crunch to your salad.
5. Blitz to make almond meal for baking.
6. Mix into zucchini fritters for dinner.
7. Sprinkle slivered almonds on top of your banana bread.
8. Eat them on their own or mix into your trail mix.
9. Combine with berries into your yoghurt.
10. Stir-fry with green beans as a crunchy side dish.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Food impacts mood. A diet rich in plants, including almonds, will increase our gut microbe diversity, and when it comes to our health, diversity is a good thing. Quality nutrition together with regular physical activity can promote good physical and mental health for all Australians.

REFERENCES

1. Liu et al, 2014. Probiotic effect of almond skins on intestinal microbiota in healthy adult humans. *Anaerobe*. 26:1-6].
2. Rethorst, C.D., Wipfli, B.M. and Landers, D.M., 2009. The antidepressive effects of exercise. *Sports medicine*, 39(6), pp.491-511
3. Choi, K.W., Chen, C.Y., Stein, M.B., Klimentidis, Y.C., Wang, M.J., Koenen, K.C. and Smoller, J.W., 2019. Assessment of bidirectional relationships between physical activity and depression among adults: a 2-sample mendelian randomization study. *JAMA psychiatry*.
4. Purcell, R., Rice, S., Butterworth, M., Clements, M., 2020. Rates and Correlates of Mental Health Symptoms in Currently Competing Elite Athletes from the Australian National High-Performance Sports System. *Sports Medicine*, 50(9), pp.1683-1694.