



Nutritional tips when working from home

By: Dr Laura Wyness, Registered Nutritionist

As many staff are adjusting to working from home and adapting to a new routine, a recent survey has shown some people may be struggling with maintaining good mental health and healthy eating patterns. The [survey](#) conducted by Ipsos MORI and King's College London interviewed 2,250 UK residents aged 18-75 years, and was carried out between the 1st and 3rd of April 2020. It found that:

- Half (49%) of people say they have felt more anxious or depressed as a result of coronavirus
- 38% have slept less or less well than normal
- 35% have eaten more food or less healthy food than normal
- 19% have drunk more alcohol than normal

Nutrition can have a positive impact on your physical and mental health – from supporting your immune system and helping you to manage stress, to aiding sleep and concentration.

Working well from home

Creating a daily routine that works for you, having regular breaks from the computer, getting outside for some activity each day if possible, and limiting your time on social media can all help when working from home.

Your diet is only part of the picture when it comes factors that can impact your work. However, what you eat can have quite an impact on your energy levels and your cognitive function. Poor nutrition and dietary habits can impact your mood, lead to higher levels of stress and depression, irritability, reduced concentration, fatigue and lower energy levels. This article focuses on 6 nutritional tips that may help improve your productivity when working from home.



[Image credit: Nikola Balic, Unsplash]

1. Focus on good quality carbs

Your brain needs glucose to function properly and carbohydrates are the best source of this nutrient. However 'carbs' come in different physical forms, from simple sugars to complex and starchy carbs.

Good quality choices are the low-glycemic index carbs which help stabilise blood glucose levels by converting to glucose more slowly and providing your brain with sustained energy. Low-GI foods include wholegrain pasta, rye, multigrain or granary bread, oats, brown or Basmati rice, quinoa, couscous, barley, sweet potato or new potatoes in their skins, yoghurt, milk, beans, lentils and most types of fruit and vegetables. These foods are preferable to high GI foods such as white bread, white rice, refined breakfast cereals, sugary drinks and sweets that all release their glucose faster.

When under pressure at work you may crave foods that will provide a quick burst of energy, but these will actually make it harder for you to focus and will leave you feeling hungry soon after. For a very quick and convenient low GI snack try a natural yoghurt with some flax seeds; chopped apple with a teaspoon of almond butter, or vegetable sticks with hummus.

2. Refuel regularly

Your blood glucose drops 2-4 hours after eating a mixed meal, so eat every 3 hours to keep your energy levels constant and to prevent hunger. If you have a lot of work to get through, you may feel like continuing without a break. However, by doing this, your productivity and energy levels are likely to decrease, so it is far better to stop for a brief break, even 5-10 minutes AWAY from your desk, to refuel and get some activity.

Skipping meals can lead to your body not getting the nutrients it needs so if you have a busy day, set an alarm to remind you to stop for a meal or snack. Make sure you have breakfast, and block off some time for lunch. Having some healthy snacks to hand can help avoid reaching for sugary biscuits or sweets. A bag of chopped veggies, unsalted nuts, oatcakes, bananas, sliced apple and nut butter, plain yoghurt and seeds, or a slice of fruit loaf are useful to have pre-prepared as handy snacks.

3. Smart hydration

Even mild dehydration can have a notable impact on your cognitive function and ability to concentrate and perform tasks that require your attention, memory or brain processing skills. Sipping water throughout the day, or getting up to refill your glass from the water cooler will help keep you hydrated and stretch your legs.

The caffeine in coffee can improve your alertness, although too much can be detrimental. Moderate coffee consumption of around 4 mugs (instant coffee) a day is generally safe, although pregnant women are advised to consume no more than 200mg of caffeine per day (around 2 mugs of instant coffee). Coffee also contains a variety of antioxidants which may be beneficial to your brain ([Benelam & Wyness, 2010](#); [Wyness, 2017](#)).

Green tea has also been shown to improve alertness, performance, memory and focus ([Dietz & Dekker, 2017](#)). One of the components in green tea, is the amino acid called L-theanine and it is thought that the combination of caffeine and L-theanine is associated with better attention and alertness ([Einothar & Martens, 2013](#)). See previous post on [healthy hydration](#).

4. Fish on the brain

Almost two thirds of your brain is made up of fat and half of that is omega-3 fats. Oily fish, such as salmon, trout, sardines and mackerel are rich sources of the long chain omega-3 fatty acids (DHA and EPA). Having a small container of mackerel or salmon to spread on oatcakes or wholemeal pitta bread is a great snack. Aim to eat 2 portions of fish a week, one of which should be an oily fish. The omega-3 fatty acids are essential for learning and memory and may be beneficial in preventing and treating depression.

It is best to get omega-3 from foods, but if you really don't like fish, then look out for omega-3 enriched foods such as eggs, some yoghurts, plant-based drinks, breads and spreads. An omega-3 supplement may also be helpful. Check the label for the DHA and EPA content and choose one that will provide about 450mg EPA and DHA, which is a similar amount provided by eating 1-2 portions of fish a week.

5. Brainy basket of fruit and veg

Fruit and vegetables are packed with a variety of micronutrients and antioxidants as well as carbohydrates for energy. The combination of these nutrients is thought to increase the brain's production of dopamine and serotonin neurotransmitters involved in mood, behaviour and cognition.

The results of a RCT of 171 young adults conducted over a 14 day period suggest that providing fresh fruit and vegetables to eat can have psychological benefits such self-reported improvements in vitality, flourishing and motivation ([Conner et al, 2017](#)).

Aim to eat a variety of different coloured fruit and vegetables. For example, blueberries and other dark red or purple fruits contain compounds called anthocyanins which have anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant effects. Evidence shows that blueberries may be effective in improving or delaying short-term memory loss ([Subash et al, 2014](#)). Yellow/green coloured fruit (e.g. kiwi fruit) and veg (e.g. avocado) contain lutein, which is beneficial for eyesight and red fruit and veg (e.g. tomatoes, and cranberries) contain lycopene which has anti-carcinogenic properties and can help protect against cardiovascular disease.

6. Nimble nuts and super seeds

To function well, your brain needs a variety of vitamins and minerals. Nuts and seeds are great for providing energy as well as a range of micronutrients and antioxidants. For example, pumpkin seeds are a great source of zinc which is beneficial for brain function. They also contain B-vitamins and magnesium which are very useful when you feel stressed.

Regular consumption of nuts may help prevent neurodegenerative diseases ([Shukitt-Hale, 2014](#)) and sharpen memory ([O'Brian et al, 2014](#)). Walnuts, Brazil nuts, almonds, cashews and chestnuts are all great to have as a handy snack, but note that a portion is equivalent to a closed handful of nuts or 30g as they are quite a calorie dense food and high in fat.

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Dr Laura Wyness, Freelance Registered Nutritionist

Website: www.laurawyness.com

Laura is a Registered Nutritionist based in Edinburgh. She was recently awarded '*Freelance Nutritionist of the Year*' by the Caroline Walker Trust. Her specialities are in evidence-based nutrition writing; workplace wellness and nutrition communications.