

Dietary Patterns and Depressive Symptoms among Middle-aged Women Evaluating Healthful and Less Favourable Associations

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Abstract

Depression is a significant public health concern worldwide, affecting individuals across various demographics. Among middle-aged women, in particular, depressive symptoms can significantly impact overall well-being and quality of life. Research suggests that dietary patterns play a crucial role in mental health outcomes, with certain dietary habits being associated with either protective or detrimental effects on depressive symptoms. This article examines the relationship between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women, evaluating both healthful and less favorable associations. Research suggests that adherence to certain dietary patterns can have protective effects against depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. The Mediterranean diet, characterized by high consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and olive oil, has consistently shown benefits for mental health. The abundance of antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids and other nutrients in this diet may help reduce inflammation and oxidative stress, which are implicated in the development of depression.

Keywords: Dietary patterns • Mental health • Mediterranean diet • Nutritional interventions

Introduction

Middle-aged women often face unique challenges that can predispose them to depressive symptoms. Hormonal changes, family responsibilities, work stress and societal pressures can all contribute to feelings of distress and mood disorders. Understanding the role of dietary patterns in mitigating or exacerbating depressive symptoms is crucial for developing effective interventions to promote mental well-being in this population. Similarly, the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, which emphasizes fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and low-fat dairy products while limiting sodium intake, has been associated with lower rates of depression. The nutrient-rich nature of these diets supports optimal brain function and neurotransmitter regulation, potentially reducing the risk of depressive symptoms. Conversely, certain dietary patterns characterized by high intake of processed foods, refined sugars and unhealthy fats have been linked to an increased risk of depression among middle-aged women. The Western diet, typified by excessive consumption of red and processed meats, sugary snacks and fried foods, has been shown to promote inflammation and impair neuroplasticity, contributing to mood disturbances [1].

Moreover, diets high in sugar and refined carbohydrates can lead to fluctuations in blood sugar levels, resulting in energy crashes and mood swings. Chronic consumption of these foods may disrupt the balance of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, further exacerbating depressive symptoms. Numerous observational studies have investigated the relationship between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. While findings have been largely consistent regarding the protective effects of healthful dietary patterns, such as the Mediterranean

and DASH diets, on mental health, the evidence regarding less favorable dietary patterns is more nuanced. Some studies have reported positive associations between adherence to a Western dietary pattern and increased risk of depression, particularly among women. However, confounding factors such as socioeconomic status, lifestyle behaviors and pre-existing health conditions may influence these associations [2].

Literature Review

Depression is a significant public health concern worldwide, affecting individuals across various age groups, genders and socioeconomic backgrounds. Among middle-aged women, depression poses a particularly pressing issue due to the unique challenges they face, including hormonal fluctuations, caregiving responsibilities, career demands and societal expectations. In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on understanding the role of dietary patterns in the development and management of depressive symptoms among this demographic. Several epidemiological studies have investigated the association between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. One notable study conducted a cross-sectional analysis of data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health and found that adherence to a healthy dietary pattern characterized by high intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins was associated with a lower likelihood of depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. Conversely, adherence to a Western dietary pattern characterized by high consumption of processed foods, refined sugars and saturated fats was positively associated with depressive symptoms [3].

Building upon this research, longitudinal studies have provided further insights into the temporal relationship between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. A prospective cohort study followed a large sample of women over a 10-year period and found that those who maintained a healthful dietary pattern had a lower risk of developing depressive symptoms compared to those with less healthful dietary habits. Similarly, a longitudinal analysis demonstrated that improvements in dietary quality over time were associated with reduced risk of depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. Furthermore, Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of dietary interventions in alleviating depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. A landmark study implemented a dietary intervention based on the Mediterranean diet in a

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sample of middle-aged women with depressive symptoms and found significant improvements in mood scores compared to the control group receiving social support alone. These findings highlight the potential therapeutic benefits of adopting healthful dietary patterns in managing depression among middle-aged women [4].

In addition to traditional dietary patterns, emerging research has also explored the impact of specific nutrients and dietary components on depressive symptoms among middle-aged women. For instance, studies have investigated the role of omega-3 fatty acids, folate, vitamin D and antioxidants in modulating mood and cognitive function. While findings have been mixed, accumulating evidence suggests that optimizing nutrient intake through dietary modification or supplementation may offer adjunctive benefits in the management of depression among middle-aged women. Overall, the literature supports a strong association between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women, with healthful dietary habits being protective against depression while less healthful dietary patterns are associated with increased risk. However, further research is needed to elucidate the underlying mechanisms, identify specific dietary components that confer the greatest benefits and develop tailored dietary interventions for this population. By addressing dietary factors in preventive and therapeutic strategies, healthcare professionals can play a pivotal role in promoting mental well-being and improving outcomes for middle-aged women with depression [5].

Discussion

The relationship between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women is a complex interplay of various factors, including nutritional intake, physiological processes and psychosocial aspects. Evaluating both healthful and less favorable associations is crucial for understanding the role of diet in mental health outcomes. Healthful dietary patterns rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins provide essential nutrients and bioactive compounds that support brain function and mood regulation. For middle-aged women, adopting such dietary patterns may offer protective effects against depressive symptoms, promoting overall mental well-being and resilience to stressors. Conversely, less favorable dietary patterns characterized by high intake of processed foods, sugary beverages and unhealthy fats may contribute to the development or exacerbation of depressive symptoms. These diets are often associated with obesity, metabolic dysfunction and chronic inflammation, all of which are linked to increased risk of depression among middle-aged women. In addition to nutritional factors, psychosocial aspects such as socioeconomic status, social support and stress levels also play a significant role in the relationship between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms. Addressing these factors alongside dietary interventions may enhance the effectiveness of preventive strategies and interventions targeting depression among middle-aged women. Overall, promoting healthful dietary patterns and discouraging less favorable dietary habits may serve as an important approach for reducing the burden of depression among middle-aged women. Further research is needed to elucidate the mechanisms underlying these associations and to develop tailored dietary interventions that optimize mental health outcomes in this population [5,6].

Conclusion

The relationship between dietary patterns and depressive symptoms among middle-aged women is complex, with healthful dietary habits offering protective effects and less favourable dietary patterns posing increased risks. By adopting a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins while minimizing intake of processed foods and sugary beverages, women can support their mental health and reduce the burden of depression. Future research should focus on elucidating the underlying mechanisms linking diet and depression, identifying vulnerable subpopulations and developing targeted interventions to promote optimal mental well-being among middle-aged women. By addressing dietary factors alongside traditional approaches to mental health care, we can foster holistic approaches to wellness and empower women to lead fulfilling lives free from the grip of depression.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest by author.

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