Nutrition and Addiction Recovery: Eating Healthy in Sobriety

Oct 13, 2021

Creating a sober life relies on prioritizing health: body, mind, and spirit. One of those choices is what you eat every day as you work to sustain your recovery efforts.

You may not know how sobriety and healthy eating are directly connected. So, let’s look at some harmful effects of substance use disorders on the body and what makes good nutrition an important factor in recovery.

Good nutrition is an important part of repairing the harm to the brain and body by chronic use of alcohol and other drugs. A balanced, nutritious diet provides essential items to the body in the form of vitamins, minerals, protein, fat and fatty acids, carbohydrates, and water.

Addiction treatment with nutritional support can help a patient learn healthy eating habits and recognize how their former eating patterns created problems, such as malnutrition and dehydration. [In treatment](https://www.hanleycenter.org/treatment/), a patient can use a food journal to track what they ate and how they felt and use this information in group discussions.

Dietary plans are customized to a patient’s specific needs and can be designed to suit vegans, vegetarians, and those with celiac disease.

Why Addiction Messes Up Your Appetite

Think of this way: everything you consume either helps or harms your body in some way. Substance use disorders are no different. They can have a profound impact on your health and well-being—and even on your appetite.

The change in appetite can come in a variety of ways. The substance may act as an appetite suppressant. It simply reduces your desire for food. Over-the-counter products are labeled for this purpose, but certain prescriptions may function in the same way. Stimulants are one form of substance that may lower your appetite.

Some substances may make you forget to eat. They may impair your judgment and have other effects on your brain that keep you from eating. Distracted by drug use, you may unintentionally skip meals regularly.

Another impact on appetite can come from tricking the body into thinking it’s been fed by consuming high-calorie alcoholic drinks. Long Island ice tea and margaritas are two examples of cocktails that contain more than 700 calories. Just one of these drinks is comparable to the recommended calorie intake for women at lunch or dinner.

How Nutrition Plays a Role in Healing Your Body

A malnourished body is unable to support recovery efforts long-term. That’s why proper nutrition is essential during and following initial treatment. Let’s take a closer look at the role nutrition plays in the healing that comes from treatment and recovery.

After detox, a patient’s appetite can be restored. Once they’re eating regularly again, they may experience some weight gain. It’s important to follow a diet that allows for a healthy amount of weight gain without a rapid increase.

A balanced, nutritious diet provides essential items to the body in the form of vitamins, minerals, protein, fat and fatty acids, carbohydrates, and water. The proper amount of these items allows a patient’s body to function properly, begin to heal itself, and reverse the damage caused by drinking or drug use. Virtually every aspect of the body can be improved through a substance-free lifestyle using nutrition as a fundamental piece of self-care.

Some of the outcomes of good nutrition choices are improving blood pressure, increasing immunity, and keeping skin and hair healthy. Healthy fats are vital for blood clotting, hormone production, muscle function, and much more. Consumption of water (and proper absorption by the body) affects nearly every body function.

Not every carb is equally helpful in healing the body. With roughly half of daily calorie intake coming from carbs, it’s important to know the difference between simple and complex carbs. Simple carbs include bleached flour and sugar, and they can be avoided. Complex carbs that are beneficial include whole grains and starchy vegetables.

Learning how specific foods affect recovery is something you can start even before you enter treatment. For example, eating whole foods containing the amino acid tyrosine will help boost dopamine levels. This list of food types includes whole grains, cheese, bananas, and lean beef. Tyrosine can help counter intense substance cravings early in your treatment program.

Sugar consumption can be a problem during treatment and increase anxiety and depression. Lowering sugar cravings can come from eating whole foods that are rich in L-glutamine. These foods include dark, leafy greens such as spinach and kale as well as beets, carrots, and beans. Lower sugar intake can help reduce inflammation during addiction treatment.

Why Nutrition Supports Brain Health during Recovery

The same nutrients that help the body in recovery can also aid the brain. Complex carbohydrates, fatty acids, water, and vitamins are essential for brain function. Vitamins can be either fat-soluble like vitamins A, D, E, and K or water-soluble like Vitamin C or B vitamins.

Another benefit of nutrition is better brain health through neuroplasticity. This is the brain’s ability to form and reorganize connections. It’s important for brain function to change after a period when it’s been rewarded routinely by drug or alcohol use for months or even years.

Here are some specific impacts of nutrition on brain health during recovery:

* Carbohydrates: Consumption of healthy carbs helps the brain produce the neurotransmitter serotonin. The outcome can be reducing cravings for substances, stabilizing mood, and providing healthy sleep.
* Amino acids: Amino acids enable the brain to produce adequate amounts of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which prevents greater aggression, more severe cravings, and negative mood changes.
* Dietary fat: Dietary fat facilitates neuroplasticity regeneration in two steps. It reduces inflammation and protects the integrity of cell membranes.
* Omega-3s: Omega-3 fatty acids decrease inflammation and increase the uptake of neurotransmitters by the brain.
* Omega-6s: Omega-6 fatty acids work with Omega-3s to increase neurotransmitter receptor function and activity.

The significance of improved brain function through nutrition cannot be overstressed. Proper brain function enables a patient to learn and retain the coping skills needed to stay focused on sobriety goals. Without it, a patient may struggle with the therapeutic elements of a treatment program and feel more challenged in their recovery efforts.

Finding a Treatment Program with Nutrition Support

A treatment program with nutrition support offers a well-balanced and diversified diet from the time you begin a [medical detox](https://www.hanleycenter.org/treatment-modalities/medical-services/). Meal plans are designed to provide a range of whole foods to create healthy eating habits as part of a daily routine. These foods are not processed or modified, in order to give patients the maximum benefit from items in every major food group.

When searching for treatment options for you or a loved one, meal plans should be a high-priority topic for you and your family. What you eat while in treatment should support your recovery goals and your individual needs for nourishment. Learning how to make healthy food and beverage choices is also an essential part of sustaining recovery.

Good nutrition impacts mental health as well as physical health. Patients with depression, anxiety, or other co-occurring mental health disorders may have worsened their conditions with poor dietary choices—or even become malnourished. Balanced diets, along with therapeutic interventions, can help a patient’s overall healing while in treatment and set them up for success later.

An evidence-based treatment program will incorporate nutrition support with steps for each patient to take. The first is meeting with a physician to discuss specific nutrition issues related to substance use. A physician can identify nutrition deficiencies from organ damage or poor eating habits, too.

After the physician identifies the nutrition deficiencies, a nutritionist can determine nutritional needs for a patient and begins planning meals around the missing nutrients as well as all six essential nutrients. Part of this work also involves recognizing how stress may be robbing the body of critical nutrients as well.

The nutrition plan is the beginning of teaching patients how to practice good eating habits during and after treatment. This may look like eating meals or snacking only at scheduled times. A patient may be taught to choose foods that are low in sodium or fat and avoid caffeine and sugar. They may be encouraged to eat an adequate amount of whole grains and fiber.

Hanley Center Meals and Nutrition Programs

“Chronic use of alcohol and other drugs can cause digestive problems and impair the absorption of important amino acids, vitamins, and minerals.  This starves the whole body including the brain.” – Chief Clinical Officer [Dr. John Dyben.](https://www.hanleycenter.org/clinical-team/)

Origins offers nutritional psychology as a patient education program. The course helps patients understand how nutrition is related to function of neurotransmitters and hormones. They also learn how nutrition impacts mood, energy, focus, and overall brain health.

Having patients explore their own pattern of nutritional behaviors is intended to empower them to make healthier decisions regarding food choices. One tool used by Origins is a 3-day journal for food. Patients can document what they ate and how they felt, and then bring it into a group discussion.

Food and mood get special attention as part of patient education. Under this topic, patients may learn they’re eating too much sugar or not enough protein. They may begin to see how their eating patterns shift from eating too much to not eating an adequate number of times per day. These unhealthy eating patterns can be adjusted in a matter of a few days during treatment.

“Along with the focus on brain recovery in its meal planning, our dietary team addresses the importance of a balanced diet in community meetings.” – Executive Chef Tim Pearce

At Hanley Center, the work of Executive Chef Tim Pearce is influenced by the dietary team. He uses nutrient dense food, such as lentils and beans, and also foods that are rich in antioxidants and omega 3s, such as salmon, flax seeds, avocado, dark leafy greens, as a balanced diet can assist the brain in its recovery from addiction.

“Superfoods” are abundant at the Hanley Center dining room. These include fresh blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, grapefruit, pineapple, and watermelon. The salad bar is stocked with even more, including kale, spinach, romaine and arugula. Also, Hanley Center caters to any dietary needs, including vegetarians, vegans, and celiac disease.

*Hanley Center is a well-known care provider offering a range of*[*treatment programs*](https://www.hanleycenter.org/treatment/)*targeting the recovery from substance use,*[*mental health issues*](https://www.hanleycenter.org/treatment/mental-health-program/)*, and beyond. Our primary mission is to provide a clear path to a life of healing and restoration. We offer renowned clinical care and have the compassion and professional expertise to guide you toward lasting recovery.*

*For information on our programs, call us today:*[*844-239-7086*](tel:+18442397086)*.*