

In the best of health

by Fitzwilliam Scott

COVID-19 has shone a light on the importance of health and how we should all look after ourselves. Governments have issued stark warnings that obesity leads to vulnerability in overcoming the virus, alongside underlying health conditions. Similarly, it has reminded everyone, both at sea and onshore, that health can't be bought and that diet plays a pivotal role in our ability to fight off infections such as this latest one.

The international catering management and training business provider MCTC has long promoted the importance of leading a nutritiously rich and wholesome lifestyle to improve health on-board. Its Managing Director, Christian Ioannou, has set up the company to change people's mindset surrounding good nutrition. He strongly believes the rise in diet-related conditions among seafarers is down to the number of preservatives that are added to ready-made products nowadays.

Healthier and cheaper

According to Ioannou, it is important that companies realise the benefits that providing good nutrition can offer to crews and vessel operations. "It is a common myth that cooking your own products will end up costing vessels more, but by cooking meals from

scratch, as opposed to ready-made portions, it can actually end up in cost efficiencies for companies," he underlines.

"There is a range of benefits that cooking self-made products offers. They have lower refined sugar levels, fewer artificial ingredients, and often contain fewer calories as cooks have the control over what actually goes into the pot, not to mention they are less expensive," Nichole Stylianou, Food Nutritionist at MCTC, lists the positives. Examples of ready-made products that achieve better nutritional and financial value when freshly made are salad dressings, bread, cakes and cookies, stocks, soups, and sauces. Buying these products ready-made will cost a lot more and will run out faster.

"Good nutrition can be achieved through eating a balanced diet, including nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. Ensuring you are eating a balanced diet can be overwhelming,

but small, gradual changes can lead to the best results," Stylianou explains. Seafarers can often be resistant to adopting a more nutritional diet if they have been used to relying on sugary foods and snacks and eating a more fatty diet, but by introducing small changes gradually, they can be more open to the change.

Good nutrition can be achieved by planning meals, following a weekly menu, planning at least one meat-free meal a week, enjoying (whole) grains more often, making plans for leftovers, and knowing what your colleagues like to eat. "You do not need to eat less to achieve a balanced diet; you just need to eat better," she adds.

Nutrition and mental health

As well as helping seafarers to stay healthy and reducing the risk of diet-related illness, such as diabetes, high blood



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pressure and obesity, good nutrition can also offer a wealth of mental health benefits. MCTC works with **Mental Health Support Solutions** (MHSS) to strengthen support for seafarer mental health and create a 360-degree care approach to their day-to-day lives.

MCTC offers, through its partners, therapeutic relief to seafarers through counselling as well as diet, sleep cycles, social interaction, cultural differences, and Internet use. It enables both parties to ensure a unified and comprehensive stance in the fight against depression and anxiety on-board ship. Further efforts are also underway to create exercise routines to help with developing healthier dietary habits off- and ashore.

MCTC has always advocated the importance of leading a nutritionally rich diet which impacts overall physical and mental health. Food is crucial in supporting mental health due to its role in providing the body with essential nutrients which can only be obtained directly from the diet.

According to Ioannou, if fed properly, the body converts carbohydrates into glucose, fatty acids into healthy brain cells, and amino acids into neurotransmitters. **Vitamin C** also lowers the amount of cortisol in the body, a stress hormone that has adverse effects on the organism if elevated for a longer period of time, while complex carbohydrates increase the production of serotonin (often called the 'happiness chemical'). All of these are found in nutrients in food, especially vegetables and fruits, and demonstrate the important relationship between nutrient-rich diets and mental health.

Charles Watkins, Managing Director, MHSS, links good mental health and sound nutrition, pointing to the positive effects of the consumption of higher levels of magnesium and zinc can have on an individual's mood. **Zinc** deficiencies can lead to mental health problems, including depression, increased anxiety, irritability, and induced deficits in social behaviour. Clinical studies have shown that low levels of zinc intake contribute to the symptoms of depression, and patients suffering from depression have a lower serum zinc level. Watkins also mentions how past studies have revealed that an increase in zinc, either through diet or supplements, have provided a natural anti-depressant effect and enhanced the mood of individuals.

It is also understood that the consumption of **magnesium**-rich products can offer positive effects on symptoms of depression. A recent random clinical trial in a population of adults diagnosed with mild-to-moderate depression found that the consumption of 248 mg of magnesium per day for six weeks resulted in a clinically significant six-point decrease ($p < 0.001$) in depressive symptoms, as measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) compared to those receiving a placebo treatment.

We are all, no doubt, aware of how consuming too much sugar can lead

to unhealthy habits and putting on weight, but too much sugar can be a key factor in depression and anxiety as well. Multiple studies have found a link between diets high in sugar and depression. Overconsumption of sugar can trigger imbalances in certain brain chemicals. These imbalances can lead to depression and can even lead to a long risk of developing a mental health disorder. Low blood levels of **polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids** are also associated with depression, implying a role in mood disorders, Watkins notes.

Sailing through the food aisle

The popular saying goes: you are what you eat. While there is more nuance to it – genetics play a role, too, as well as the quality of the environment and the relations we have with others, plus, of course, exercising also counts – there is no denying that the diet is one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal to either ruin or heal our bodies. The market for diet advice is also dual, with a lot of sham on one side of the aisle and genuine life-saving science & nutrition intervention on the other. The brave seafarers, thanks to whom global trade didn't cave in during the past year, deserve only the best cooking. That's some food for thought for their employers! ■



MCTC is an international maritime catering management and training business, with its primary vision being to change the quality of the meals served on-board vessels, significantly contributing to healthier eating habits. MCTC offers full catering management to shipping companies as well as a comprehensive range of training programmes for chefs and cooks working on-board ships. Go to www.mctconsultancy.com to learn more.