



Can the Keto Diet Help Treat Depression?

This high-fat, low-carb diet may help people with treatment-resistant depression, according to a new clinical trial.

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Key Takeaways

A well-designed new study suggests that the keto diet may modestly alleviate symptoms for people with treatment-resistant depression.

The keto diet is high in healthy fats and low in carbohydrates.

It's possible that the keto diet's anti-inflammatory effects boost mood, but more research is needed.

A recent clinical trial suggests the high-fat, low-carb [keto diet](#) may offer modest but statistically significant improvements in treatment-resistant depression.^[1]

“At the same time, there’s been growing public interest in whether diet, especially the ketogenic diet — a diet high in [healthy fat](#) but low in carbohydrate — could help mental health.”

Despite online testimonials about the depression-fighting effects of the keto diet, Dr. Gao says there’s been a lack of high-quality research to support such claims. “We wanted to study this carefully to understand whether there is a real benefit,” she says. Here’s what she and her team discovered.

Study Found Real but Modest Benefits From the Keto Diet

Published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, the study followed 88 participants who were age 42 on average and had been diagnosed with treatment-resistant depression.

Researchers randomly assigned study subjects to follow one of two diets for six weeks. One group ate prepared foods that followed the keto diet, with less than 30 grams (g) of carbohydrates a day; the other “control” group followed a plant-forward eating plan.

The researchers tracked the participants on the PHQ-9 Score, which is a 0 to 27 point scale used by doctors to measure the severity of depression. The scientists took measurements at baseline, after six weeks on the diet, and after 12 weeks.

By the end of the trial, participants who followed the keto diet had a 10.5 point drop in their PHQ-9 Score, while those who followed the control diet had an 8.3 point drop.

Clinical Trial Adds to Existing Data on the Keto Diet for Depression

There has been some data to suggest a keto diet may be helpful for depression, although most is preliminary.

A case series published in *Frontiers in Nutrition* in 2024 followed three patients with major depression and generalized anxiety disorder on a keto diet. Two patients saw their depression symptoms disappear within seven weeks on the diet.^[2]

A small study of college students published in 2025 found a link between those who followed a keto diet for 10 weeks and a 70 percent decrease in [symptoms of depression](#). A pilot study done in 2025 by Stanford researchers determined that the keto diet had a positive impact on other mental health conditions, specifically bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.^{[3][4]}

The new study stands out for its protocol, known for producing high-quality conclusions. “This is one of the first well-controlled, randomized clinical trials testing a ketogenic diet in the treatment of treatment-resistant depression,” says [Amir Afkhami, MD, PhD](#), a professor and the vice chair of the George Washington University department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences.

“A lot of the prior work on depression and diet has been observational, which makes it hard to separate true dietary effects from the effects of weight loss and the expectation that you will get better once you’ve enrolled in a trial,” Dr. Afkhami says.

Why Could the Keto Diet Help Ease Depression?

These may impact several pathways in the body that are linked to mood disorders, easing symptoms, she says. The ketones may also spark a series of changes that are anti-inflammatory and neuroprotective, stabilizing symptoms, according to Dr. Saltz.

There may also be a communal feeling when someone follows a keto diet that helps support mood, suggests [Aaron P. Brinen, PsyD](#), an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

“People who are really into the keto diet feel good at the success of keeping their ketones at the level they’re supposed to, and enjoy finding community in other people who do this,” he says. “You’re engaging in activities that provide purpose, pleasure, and socialization — these are all core treatments for depression.”

Gao says there are several possible explanations for the keto diet’s impact on depression — and none are certain at this point. “Some research suggests changes in brain energy use, inflammation, gut microbiome, or metabolism could play a role,” she says. “Our team is currently looking into this.”

Should You Try the Keto Diet for Depression?

Doctors say it’s too early to prescribe a keto diet for treatment-resistant depression. “This is not a simple intervention — there’s a lot to following the keto diet,” Dr. Brinen says. “The benefit is also not large.”

Saltz also doesn’t recommend trying the keto diet for depression just yet. “No one in psychiatry is ready to recommend this as a research-backed method of treatment

enough about its long-term safety and who is most likely to benefit. Anyone considering dietary changes for mental health should discuss this with their doctor or mental health professional.”

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Emily Kay Votruba has copy edited and fact-checked for national magazines, websites, and books since 1997, including *Self*, *GQ*, *Gourmet*, *Golf Magazine*,...

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Korin Miller is a health journalist with more than a decade of experience in the field. She covers a range of health topics, including nutrition, recent...

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