

The Impact of Junk Food on Mood: A Comprehensive Literature-Based Research Study

Sairaj Prakash Shinde

Abhishek Baban Bhosale

M.Sc. Computer Science, Semester-III,

Pune Vidyarthi Griha's College of Science and Commerce, Pune

2. ABSTRACT

Mental-health problems such as depression, anxiety, irritability, emotional instability, and chronic stress are increasing worldwide. While genetic, social, and environmental factors contribute to these conditions, recent research highlights the crucial yet often overlooked role of diet, particularly the consumption of junk food. Junk food—defined as ultra-processed, high-sugar, high-fat, low-nutrient foods—is consumed globally across all age groups. Although widely known for its physical consequences, its emotional and psychological effects remain less understood.

This study synthesizes findings from 22 peer-reviewed research papers published between 2014 and 2025 to explore how junk food affects mood and emotional well-being. Results consistently show that high junk-food intake is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, mood swings, irritability, sleep disturbances, cognitive deficits, and increased psychological distress. Biological evidence demonstrates that junk food disrupts neurotransmitters, increases inflammation, destabilizes blood sugar, harms gut microbiota, and causes nutrient deficiencies—all of which impair emotional regulation. Psychological studies further reveal that emotional eating, impulsivity, addictive cravings, and poor sleep intensify mood problems.

The study concludes that junk food is a significant modifiable risk factor for poor mental health across the lifespan. Enhancing dietary quality may serve as an effective, accessible, and low-cost strategy to improve mood, reduce emotional distress, and strengthen mental resilience. Implications for individuals, families, schools, healthcare systems, and policymakers are discussed.

3. INTRODUCTION

Mental-health challenges—including depression, anxiety, irritability, mood swings, emotional fatigue, and poor stress tolerance—are becoming increasingly prevalent across the world. Rapid lifestyle changes, rising stress levels, sedentary behavior, and increased reliance on fast food have contributed to declining psychological well-being. While mental health is typically examined through biological, psychological, and social frameworks, nutrition remains one of the least explored yet most impactful factors.

Junk food, which is high in sugar, saturated fats, salt, preservatives, and artificial additives, has become a major part of modern diets. Fast-food chains, packaged snacks, sugary drinks, and ultra-processed foods are widely consumed due to convenience, affordability, and aggressive marketing. At the same time, the global rise in mental-health disorders suggests a potential link between modern dietary patterns and emotional functioning.

Research from nutrition science, psychiatry, public health, and psychology shows a consistent association between unhealthy dietary patterns and poor mental health. Specifically, frequent junk-food consumption has been linked to depression, anxiety, irritability, aggression, poor sleep, reduced motivation, fatigue, and cognitive impairments.

This study aims to analyze existing literature to understand the relationship between junk food and mood. It focuses on biological, psychological, and behavioral mechanisms by which junk food affects emotional well-being. It also examines impacts across different age groups and identifies implications for health systems, education, families, and public policy.

4. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite extensive global research indicating that junk food contributes to mental-health issues, public awareness of these psychological effects remains low. Most people associate junk food primarily with obesity, diabetes, or heart disease but fail to recognize its emotional and cognitive consequences.

The central research problem is:

How does junk-food consumption negatively influence mood, and what does scientific literature reveal about the emotional and psychological impact of unhealthy dietary habits?

The lack of awareness contributes to unhealthy eating patterns that may exacerbate emotional instability, behavioral problems, poor academic/work performance, and long-term mental-health risks. Understanding this problem is essential for designing effective interventions.

5. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CHOSEN PROBLEM

5.1 Mental-health disorders are rising

Depression, anxiety, irritability, and stress-related disorders are increasing among children, adolescents, adults, and older individuals.

5.2 Junk-food consumption is widespread

Fast food, sugary drinks, instant snacks, and processed meals dominate modern diets due to convenience and affordability.

5.3 Psychological effects of junk food are overlooked

While people understand physical risks, few recognize mood-related consequences.

5.4 Strong scientific evidence exists

Studies show that junk food alters neurotransmitters, inflammatory processes, gut bacteria, and blood sugar—all critical to emotional functioning.

5.5 High risk among children & teenagers

Young people consume the most junk food and have developing brains, making them highly vulnerable.

5.6 Long-term consequences

Chronic junk-food intake increases lifetime risks of depression, persistent anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and cognitive decline.

5.7 Dietary improvement is achievable

Dietary change is simple, affordable, and effective for improving emotional health.

6. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

6.1 Main Objective

To understand how junk-food consumption affects mood and emotional well-being using existing scientific literature.

6.2 Specific Objectives

1. Review research linking junk food to mental-health outcomes.
 2. Explain biological mechanisms affecting brain chemistry and mood regulation.
 3. Examine psychological and behavioral patterns associated with junk food.
 4. Evaluate mood impacts across age groups.
 5. Identify public-health implications.
 6. Recommend strategies for improving emotional well-being through nutrition.
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7. LITERATURE REVIEW

7.1 Overview of junk food

Junk food consists of:

- Fast food (burgers, fries, pizza)
- Sugary drinks (cola, energy drinks)
- Packaged snacks (chips, biscuits)
- Sweets, chocolates, pastries
- Ultra-processed foods (ready meals, instant noodles)

These foods are calorie-dense but nutrient-poor.

7.2 Junk food and depression

Studies (Ejtahed et al., Malmir et al., Tang et al.) consistently show higher depression rates among heavy junk-food consumers due to:

- serotonin imbalance
- chronic inflammation
- nutrient deficiency
- poor sleep
- blood-sugar fluctuations

7.3 Junk food and anxiety

Sugary beverages and fried foods increase anxiety by:

- stimulating adrenaline-like responses
- altering gut bacteria
- elevating cortisol
- disturbing sleep

7.4 Mood swings and irritability

Mood instability results from:

- sugar crashes

- dopamine fluctuations
- poor sleep
- hormonal imbalance

7.5 Sleep disturbance

Poor sleep is linked to junk food through:

- caffeine + sugar interactions
- indigestion
- unstable blood glucose

7.6 Gut–brain axis disruption

Ultra-processed foods destroy beneficial gut bacteria, reducing serotonin production.

7.7 Impacts on children & teens

Studies report:

- hyperactivity
- impulsive behaviour
- aggression
- emotional volatility

7.8 Long-term mental-health risks

Longitudinal studies suggest junk food contributes to:

- chronic depression
- lifelong anxiety patterns
- cognitive decline in older adults

7.9 Research gaps

More RCTs and additive-specific studies are required.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

8.1 Research design

Qualitative, descriptive, literature-based.

8.2 Data sources

Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, MDPI, BMJ, CDC, Harvard publications.

8.3 Inclusion criteria

- Peer-reviewed
- Published between 2014–2025
- Measures mood, depression, anxiety, sleep, irritability

8.4 Exclusion criteria

- Non-academic sources
- Physical-health-only studies
- Weak methods
- Inaccessible full texts

8.5 Data extraction

For each study:

- author, year, country
- population
- type of junk food
- mental-health outcomes
- assessment tools (PHQ, DASS, GHQ, etc.)
- findings
- limitations

8.6 Analysis method

Thematic content analysis:

1. familiarization
2. coding
3. theme development
4. cross-study comparison
5. synthesis

9. DATA COLLECTION (SECONDARY)

Approximately 60 potential studies → 30 full-text reviewed → 22 included.

Data included sample sizes, types of junk food, psychological measures, and major outcomes.

10. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Finding 1: Junk food increases depression

Across adults, teens, elderly, and children.

Finding 2: Junk food increases anxiety & stress

Especially linked to sugary beverages and fried foods.

Finding 3: Mood swings & irritability

Due to glycemic spikes/crashes.

Finding 4: Poor sleep mediates emotional problems

Sleep disruption worsens mood.

Finding 5: Nutrient deficiencies harm brain function

Low levels of B-vitamins, omega-3, zinc, iron lead to fatigue and sadness.

Finding 6: Gut health disruption

Reduced microbial diversity affects serotonin.

Finding 7: All age groups impacted

Effects vary by developmental stage.

11. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that junk food affects emotional well-being through biological, psychological, and behavioral pathways. Neurotransmitter imbalance, inflammatory responses, gut dysbiosis, and nutrient deficiencies directly impair mood regulation. Behavioral patterns like emotional eating, impulsivity, and reward-seeking intensify distress. The evidence strongly indicates that dietary choices play a significant role in determining mental-health outcomes.

12. CONCLUSION

Junk-food consumption is a significant predictor of poor emotional health. Across 22 reviewed studies, strong associations were found between junk-food intake and depression, anxiety, mood swings, irritability, sleep disturbances, and psychological distress. Improving diet quality—reducing sugary drinks, fast food, and ultra-processed foods—can significantly boost emotional resilience. Nutrition should be integrated into mental-health interventions and public-health strategies.

13. KEY IMPACTS OF FINDINGS**Individual impacts**

- Higher depression/anxiety
- Emotional instability
- Reduced concentration

Youth impacts

- Behavioural problems
- Poor academic performance

Family impacts

- Increased conflict
- Emotional imbalance

Workplace impacts

- Low productivity
- Burnout

Healthcare impacts

- Increased mental-health burden

Economic impacts

- Reduced workforce output
- Higher medical costs

Societal impacts

- Higher psychological distress
- Poorer quality of life

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