

➔ Could comfort foods be causing our mental distress?

Two recent UK studies have linked somersaulting mental illness rates to changes in eating habits over the past 50 years, and particular, to the low intake of essential fats and antioxidants in our modern industrialized diets.

Fresh produce consumption has plummeted 34 percent in 60 years, the vegetables we do eat, grown on exhausted soils, have reduced levels of nutrients, and industrial farming techniques have fundamentally altered the biochemistry of animals we consume. Chickens reach slaughter weight twice as fast as they did 30 years ago, but must haul around carcasses containing 22 percent fat, instead of two, to do so.

Perhaps then, the only surprise in January's reports from the Mental Health Foundation and Sustain was that it took so long to spot the dietary link to modern mental woes of ADHD, Alzheimer's, schizophrenia and exponentially increasing rates of depression in every generation since the Second World War.

But there is a ray of hope, as the Mental Health Foundation chief executive Andrew McCulloch points out, "It costs £1,000 (\$1,750) a week to keep someone in a psychiatric hospital. How much does good food cost?"

➔ Sleepless nights caused by trying to live the American dream resulted in a record 42 million sleeping pill prescriptions being filled last year.

According to IMS Health, demand rose 60 percent in the last five years, partly due to a new wave of advertising promising sweet dreams with minimal side effects through new drugs like Ambien and Lunesta.

Although some experts regard insomnia as a symptom of our mentally overwrought but physically under-stimulated society, others worry about over-prescription without regard to the root causes of sleeplessness, implications of long-term use and the known, if rare, side effects such as sleep walking, amnesia and – we're not making this up – sleep driving.

Steven Wells, a lawyer from Buffalo, stopped taking Ambien within a month after repeatedly waking up to find he had raided his refrigerator and, in one incident, ripped a towel rack out of a wall – all without any recollection the next day.

"Clearly there's a significant increase in people who report insomnia and, from my perspective that's the result of our modern-day lifestyle," Harvard psychologist Dr. Gregg D. Jacobs told the *New York Times*, although he also warned that it was a perception that drug makers were clearly trying to exploit.

US drug makers spent \$298 million in the first 11 months of 2005 targeting the sleep-deprived who are struggling to find the off-switch, four times more than their entire ad budgets for 2004.

