

# Foods to Help You Feel Better

## 6 ways to add mood-boosting foods to your diet.

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WebMD Feature

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Are you feeling down in the dumps? Are you irritated at how often you've been irritable?

Perhaps it's time to look at the foods and drinks you consume to see if they are trashing your mood. Nutrition experts say that the foods you eat can help you feel better -- or feel worse -- in the short-term and the long-term.

- Meal-to-meal and day-to-day, keeping your blood sugars steady and your gastrointestinal (GI) tract running smoothly will help you feel good and energetic. If your blood sugars are on a roller-coaster ride -- hitting highs and lows from too much sugar and refined flour -- you are more likely to feel out of sorts. This is also true if your gastrointestinal system is distressed due to intense hunger from a fad diet or constipation because you aren't getting enough fiber and water.
- Week-to-week and month-to-month, keeping your body healthy and disease-free makes good moods more likely. For example, key nutrients you get in certain foods can influence the levels of feel-good hormones such as serotonin. Other nutrients can help prevent inflammation so blood circulates well to all of your organs.

"Eating a heart healthy diet -- high in fiber and low in saturated fat -- is a great place to start to boost your mood. There isn't any question about it, says Diane M. Becker MPH, ScD, director of the Center for Health Promotion at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Conversely, "a high-fat, high-glycemic load meal can make you physically feel dysfunction in your body. People who eat this type of meal tend to feel bad and sleepy afterwards," she says.

### 6 Tips for Foods and Beverages That Help You Feel Good

#### 1. Seek out foods rich in vitamin B12 and folic acid (folate).

What's special about chili made with kidney beans and lean beef? Or a light chicken Caesar salad made with skinless chicken breast and romaine lettuce? Or grilled salmon with a side of broccoli?

All these dishes feature one food that is rich in folic acid (folate) and another that is rich in vitamin B12. These two vitamins appear to help prevent disorders of the central nervous system, mood disorders, and dementias, says Edward Reynolds, MD, at the Institute of Epileptology, King's College, London.

The link between higher food intakes of folate and a lower prevalence of depressive symptoms crosses cultures, too. A recent study confirmed this association in Japanese men.

Folic acid is usually found in beans and greens. Vitamin B12 is found in meats, fish, poultry, and dairy.

Other dishes that feature B-12 and folic acid-rich foods include:

- A burrito or enchilada made with black beans plus beef, chicken, or pork
- A spinach salad topped with crab or salmon
- An egg white or egg substitute omelet filled with sauteed spinach and reduced-fat cheese

## **2. Enjoy fruits and vegetables in a big way.**

Fruits and vegetables are packed with key nutrients and antioxidant phytochemicals, which directly contribute to your health and health-related quality of life.

In a one study, eating two more servings of fruits and vegetables a day was associated with an 11% higher likelihood of good functional health. People who ate the highest amount of fruits and vegetables felt better about their health.

## **3. Eat selenium-rich foods every day.**

Selenium is a mineral that acts like an antioxidant in the body. What do antioxidants have to do with feeling better and minimizing bad moods? Research suggests that the presence of oxidative stress in the brain is associated with some cases of mild to moderate depression in the elderly population.

One study evaluated the depression scores of elderly people whose daily diet was either supplemented with 200 micrograms of selenium a day or a placebo. Although more research is needed to confirm the findings, the group taking selenium had higher amounts of selenium circulating in their blood and significant decreases in their depression symptoms.

Try to get at least the recommended daily allowance for selenium: 55 micrograms a day for men and women.

Whole grains are an excellent source of selenium. By eating several servings a day of whole grains such as oatmeal, whole-grain bread, and brown rice, you can easily get 70 micrograms of selenium. Other foods rich in selenium include:

- Beans and legumes
- Lean meat (lean pork or beef, skinless chicken or turkey)
- Low-fat dairy foods
- Nuts and seeds (especially Brazil nuts)
- Seafood (oysters, clams, crab, sardines, and fish)

## **4. Eat fish several times a week.**

Several recent studies have suggested that men and women have a lower risk of having symptoms of depression if they eat a lot of fish, particularly fatty fish like salmon, which is high in omega-3 fatty acids.

Omega-3s from fish seem to have positive effects on clinically defined mood swings such as postpartum depression, says Jay Whelan, PhD, head of the department of nutrition at the University of Tennessee.

Good sources of omega-3 fatty acids include:

- Herring
- Rainbow trout
- Salmon
- Sardine

## 5. Get a daily dose of vitamin D

Does a little time in the sun seem to make you feel better? The sun's rays allow our bodies to synthesize and regulate vitamin D.

Four recent studies showed an association between low serum levels of vitamin D and higher incidences of four mood disorders: PMS, seasonal affective disorder, nonspecified mood disorder, and major depressive disorder.

Researcher Pamela K. Murphy, PhD, at the Medical University of South Carolina says people can help manage their moods by getting at least 1,000 to 2,000 IU of vitamin D a day.

That's significantly more than the RDA for vitamin D, which is 200 IU for adults under 50, 400 IU for ages 51 to 70, and 600 IU for people over 70.

Very few foods naturally contain vitamin D. So she recommends we get vitamin D from a variety of sources: short periods of sun exposure, vitamin D supplements, and foods.

Vitamin D can be found in:

- Fatty fish such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel
- Beef liver
- Cheese
- Egg yolks

But our primary source of dietary vitamin D is fortified foods, such as breakfast cereals, breads, juices, and milk.

## 6. Treat Yourself to 1 oz of Chocolate

"Small amounts of dark chocolate can be a physical upper," says Becker at Johns Hopkins. "Dark chocolate has an effect on the levels of brain endorphins," those feel-good chemicals that our bodies produce. Not only that, but dark chocolate also seems to have a heart-healthy anti-clogging effect in our blood vessels.

In one study from the Netherlands, Dutch men who ate 1/3 of a chocolate bar each day had lower levels of blood pressure and lower rates of heart disease. The chocolate also boosted their general sense of well-being.

### How Foods and Beverages May Make You Feel Bad

Just as some foods can help you feel better, others can make you feel down. Here are ways to reduce the harmful effects of three foods that can drag you down.

#### 1. Reduce foods high in saturated fat.

Saturated fat is well known for its role in promoting heart disease and some types of cancer. Now researchers suspect saturated fat also play a role in depression.

The link was found in a study called the Coronary Health Improvement Project, which followed 348 people between the 24 and 81. A decrease in saturated fat over a six-week period was associated with a decrease in depression.

#### 2. Limit alcohol carefully.

That "feel-good" drink, alcohol, is actually a depressant. In small doses, alcohol can produce a temporary feeling of euphoria. But the truth is that alcohol is a chemical depressant to the human brain and affects all nerve cells.

Depending on the amount of alcohol consumed, people can go quickly from feeling relaxed to experiencing exaggerated emotions and impaired coordination.

It's no coincidence that depressive disorders often co-occur with substance abuse, and one of the main forms of substance abuse in this country is alcohol.

### **3. Don't go crazy with caffeine.**

Caffeine can increase irritability a couple of ways.

- If the caffeine you consume later in the day disrupts your nighttime sleeping, you are likely to be cranky and exhausted until you get a good night's rest.
- Caffeine can also bring on a burst or two of energy, often ending with a spiral into fatigue.

Some people are more sensitive than others to the troublesome effects of caffeine. If you are sensitive to caffeine, decrease the amount of coffee, tea, and sodas you drink to see if this helps uplift your mood and energy level, particularly in the latter part of the day.