



Feel good foods

Healthy Hedonist Becky Graham shows how to improve your well-being by using mood-boosting foods ...

WE ALL WANT TO FEEL good – that's a given – and we all know how our mood can influence what we eat. If you've ever craved a big bowl of chilli, pasta or a cheeky slice of cake after a long stressful day, you'll know what I'm talking about... 'stressed' is 'desserts' spelt backwards after all!

But did you know that what we eat can have a powerful effect on the way we feel?

The first thing we need to look at is sugar. The brain's preferred source of fuel is glucose, obtained primarily from carbohydrates that are broken down into simple sugars in our body. This is why at times of stress we might crave a quick sugary snack that will quickly raise blood sugar levels and give us a boost. Often we combine this craving with caffeine, 'afternoon tea' anyone? Perhaps this very British ritual was invented to remedy this energy dip – the perfect solution, caffeine and sugar!

However, as we know, this is only a temporary solution and when the effects of these stimulants have worn off, we're left feeling tired, irritable and a little spaced out. This is because when we eat something containing a lot of sugar, the pancreas, which acts like a sugar-packaging factory, releases the hormone insulin that works to pull excess glucose out of the bloodstream and store it away for later use. This means there's less glucose available to your brain, so although it's the primary source of fuel, too much can affect concentration, memory and learning.

The key to balancing blood sugar is to avoid processed foods and build your diet around whole foods. The best way to provide a steady stream of glucose for your brain is to include complex carbohydrates that have longer chains of sugar and are broken down gradually. Vegetable cell walls resist digestion, slowing the release of sugar into the bloodstream and also provide

a whole array of vitamins and minerals. Whole grains, beans, peas and lentils are also a great source of complex carbohydrates.

Once blood sugar is sorted, the next focus is to make sure we consume the raw materials for making neurotransmitters, which are chemical messengers used for communication by the brain and nervous system.

Serotonin is our brain's 'happy chemical' and the key component for feelings of calm, well-being, optimism and happiness. It works to regulate sleep, pain sensitivity and blood pressure and is important for appetite control. Low levels of serotonin have been linked to depression and anxiety, in fact most anti-depressants work by blocking the brain's receptors for

serotonin, freeing up more to stay circulating in the brain.

The good news is you can help to eat yourself happy by including foods that contain the building blocks for serotonin. The body uses tryptophan to produce a compound called 5-HTP, which is used to manufacture serotonin and melatonin and found primarily in protein. A diet rich in fish, poultry, eggs, soy foods, cheese, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, spirulina, beans and pulses, avocados, bananas, oats and brown rice have been shown to elevate mood.

To make sure serotonin does its job, we need to make sure the receptors in our brain are in good working order. Built from the omega 3 fats, EPA and DHA, the best complete source

TOP 10 FOODS

- **Turkey** is the number one food source of tryptophan.
- **Spirulina** is considered a 'superfood' and rightly so – it's packed with tryptophan, B vitamins, magnesium and calcium. Add a teaspoon to your next green smoothie.
- **Avocados** provide us with healthy fats and contain B vitamins important for energy production, antioxidants, tryptophan and manganese, which may help to ease PMS.
- **Walnuts** are a great source of omega-3 fats, magnesium, potassium, B vitamins and tryptophan.
- **Pumpkin seeds** contain omega-3, B vitamins, tryptophan and zinc; low levels of zinc have been associated with anxiety and depression. Sunflower seeds, brazil nuts, oysters and whole grains are all good sources of zinc too.
- **Pineapple** is one of the fruits with the highest concentration of serotonin, along with plantain, kiwi and plums. Bananas are also great source and contain potassium for a healthy nervous system as well as tryptophan, tyrosine and B vitamins.
- **Greens and beans** contain folate that works with vitamin B12 to support mood and the nervous system, the best source of B12 is from meat, fish, dairy.
- **Brazil nuts** are a source of selenium, which is linked to fighting depression.
- **Green tea** – reach for a cuppa if you're feeling stressed, it contains l-theanine which has been shown to have a calming, relaxing effect.
- **Chocolate** – dark chocolate, or better still, raw cacao is a natural mood booster that stimulates endorphins, the brain chemical that gives us a feeling of 'euphoria' as if we're in love!

is oily fish - salmon, mackerel, tuna or herring. Omega 3 helps to support physical and mental alertness. If you've got a big presentation or deadline coming up, ensuring you get enough can enhance the ability to focus. Omega 3 also works to naturally increase the neurotransmitter dopamine, which has potent mood lifting powers and is linked to motivation and stress management. To obtain optimum levels of EPA and DHA try to eat oily fish three to four times a week.

For vegetarians and vegans, flax, linseed, hemp and walnut oils are a source of omega-3 fats and make a tasty base for salad dressings. Flaxseeds also contain tryptophan and can be bought ready-milled and sprinkled on porridge or added to smoothies. Used whole they need to be soaked first to make them more easily digestible, they're also a great source of fibre to encourage healthy elimination. Chia seeds work in a similar way and soaked in coconut milk make a really tasty snack or dessert.

If you struggle to sleep at night a great pre-bedtime snack is a couple of rough oatcakes with a banana. Oats help the body produce melatonin, our sleep hormone, eating a small amount of complex carbs before bed can help you fall asleep faster and sleep more soundly through the night, while the tryptophan in bananas helps to relax the body and encourage sleep. Cherries are in season and a great source of melatonin, you can buy montmorency tart cherry juice from health food stores to dilute and sip before bed or include the whole fruit as part of dessert.

Another important building block is tyrosine, which the body uses to produce adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine that can influence our mood. Protein foods are the best source of tyrosine, including chicken and turkey, milk, cheese, yoghurt and cottage cheese. If you're vegetarian or avoiding dairy, peanuts, almonds, avocados, bananas, pumpkin seeds and sesame seeds also contain tyrosine.

Don't underestimate the gut

A healthy digestive system is central to a healthy brain and balanced mood. Research suggests symptoms such as brain fog, indecisions, anxiety, depression, mood swings and attention disorders may be linked to food. But how can what we eat affect our mood? The fact is that 90-95% of serotonin is produced in the gut. Signals travel both directions between the gut and brain through our body's largest nerve - the vagus nerve. This communication

highway has been called the 'gut-brain' axis and research has found those with gastrointestinal symptoms are at a higher risk of mood imbalances, anxiety, and depression. If the gut is not functioning optimally it is likely to have an effect on our production of serotonin and a knock on effect on our mood. Therefore when thinking about mood boosting foods, working to support both the gut and brain will have the best

outcome. Prebiotic foods such as leeks, onions, garlic, asparagus, chicory and bananas provide food for our 'good' bacteria and probiotic foods, specifically fermented foods like yoghurt, kefir, miso and sauerkraut contain beneficial bacteria to support gut health.

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Quick and easy Sauerkraut

GF DF EF MF V

Makes **1 jar** | Prep **20 mins** |

Cook **none** | Calories **201** (per jar)

1 medium cabbage head
1 tbsp Himalayan salt
1 tbsp caraway seeds (optional)
a glass jar, for storage

- Before you start, make sure your jar is clean to give the good bacteria the best chance to develop as possible, and make sure your hands are clean too!
- Get rid of the outer cabbage leaves and set aside one good sturdy leaf to use as a lid. Chop the cabbage finely. If you have a food processor, use the shredding function, then add to a bowl and combine with salt.
- Massage and squeeze the salt into the cabbage for 5-10 minutes.
- When the cabbage becomes watery, add the seeds, then give it another mix. You're now done!
- Pack the cabbage tightly into the jar and use the leaf you set aside earlier to cover the shredded mixture once the jar is full. This will help keep the cabbage submerged in its own liquid and encourage the fermenting process.
- Make sure the jar is jam-packed, then secure the lid and ferment at room temperature. The best thing to do is keep an eye on it and give the mixture a smell to make sure you're on track. You may see a foam or scum at the surface - it's totally normal so just skim it off. It should be ready in 3 days, but may take up to 10. Once opened, store in the fridge and add a dollop to every summer salad.

1.7g Total fat **0g** Saturates **7g** Salt **22.9g** Sugar **10.5g** Protein

Banana 'ice cream' and chocolate sauce

GF SF DF EF MF V

Serves **2** | Prep **5 mins** plus freezing |

Cook **none** | Calories **128** (per serving)

frozen bananas, freeze as many you intend to serve, (1 banana serves 2 people)

FOR THE CHOCOLATE SAUCE

1 tbsp coconut oil, melted
1 tbsp raw cacao powder
1 tsp agave or date syrup

FOR THE TOPPING

sugar-free almond or peanut butter
cherries or berries
raw cacao nibs

- You only need to freeze the bananas for a couple of hours, any longer and they'll be tricky to blend. To make the ice cream, put the bananas in a high-speed blender until they become creamy and fluffy.
 - To whisk up the sauce, simply mix the ingredients together and drizzle over the ice cream with any toppings that take your fancy. Tuck in and enjoy!
- TIP** Try blending the bananas with acai powder for a tasty berry twist.

7.5g Total fat **6.3g** Saturates **0g** Salt **7.2g** Sugar **1.1g** Protein