

## 10 Superfoods for Stress Relief

By Dr. Mercola

Nearly 40 percent of Americans report overeating or eating unhealthy foods as a result of stress.<sup>1</sup> While it may seem tempting to drown your anxiety in a bowl of ice cream or calm your nerves with a bag of chips... eating junk foods while stressed may be particularly dangerous to your health.

Among a group of chronically stressed women (those caring for a spouse or parent with dementia), eating foods high in unhealthy fats and sugar lead to concerning health effects, including a larger waistline, increased abdominal fat, more oxidative damage, and more insulin resistance.<sup>2</sup>

In this case the food alone wasn't the problem... it was the combination of junk food and stress that was dangerous, as low-stress women who ate similar foods did not experience such profound changes over the course of the study.

The study's lead author, Kirstin Aschbacher, PhD, an assistant professor in the University of California at San Francisco Department of Psychiatry, said:<sup>3</sup>

"Many people think a calorie is a calorie, but this study suggests that two women who eat the same thing could have different metabolic responses based on their level of stress.

There appears to be a stress pathway that works through diet – for example, it could be similar to what we see in animals, where fat cells grow faster in response to junk food when the body is chronically stressed."

At the same time, junk foods will only give you a moment of reprieve. After the initial pleasure wears off, you may find yourself battling mood swings, irritability, and other unpleasant emotions on top of the stress, courtesy of the sugar, trans fats, artificial colors, monosodium glutamate (MSG), and whatever other synthetic ingredients you may have consumed.

On the other hand, by choosing healthy foods you can actually impact your mood on a positive note, helping to relieve tension, stabilize blood sugar, and send your stress packing.

### 10 Best Foods to Eat for Stress

Had a long day at the office? Kids acting out all day? Feeling a financial crunch or relationship strain? Grab your fork and dig in to the following stress-busting superfoods.<sup>4</sup>

#### 1. Green Leafy Vegetables

Dark leafy greens like spinach are rich in folate, which helps your body produce mood-regulating neurotransmitters, including serotonin and dopamine. One 2012 study found people who consumed the most folate had a lower risk of depression than those who ate the least.<sup>5</sup> Not to mention, research from the University of Otago found eating fruits and vegetables of any sort (except fruit

juice and dried fruit) helped young adults calm their nerves.<sup>6</sup> Department of Psychology researcher Dr. Tamlin Conner said:<sup>7</sup>

"On days when people ate more fruits and vegetables, they reported feeling calmer, happier, and more energetic than they normally did."

## 2. Organic Turkey Breast

Turkey is a good source of tryptophan, an amino acid (protein building block) that your body converts into serotonin. Research shows that argumentative people who consumed tryptophan become markedly more pleasant, with researchers noting:<sup>8</sup>

"Tryptophan significantly decreased quarrelsome behaviors and increased agreeable behaviors and perceptions of agreeableness."

Pumpkin seeds, nuts, and free-range organic eggs are also rich sources of tryptophan.

## 3. Fermented Foods

The secret to improving your mental health is in your gut, as unhealthy gut flora can have a detrimental impact your brain health, leading to issues like anxiety and depression. Beneficial bacteria have a direct effect on brain chemistry, transmitting mood- and behavior-regulating signals to your brain via your vagus nerve.

For instance, the probiotic *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* was found to have a marked effect on GABA levels in certain brain regions and lowered the stress-induced hormone corticosterone, resulting in reduced anxiety- and depression-related behavior.<sup>9</sup>

Women who regularly ate yogurt containing beneficial bacteria had improved brain function compared to those who did not consume probiotics.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, they had decreased activity in two brain regions that control central processing of emotion and sensation:

The insular cortex (insula), which plays a role in functions typically linked to emotion (including perception, motor control, self-awareness, cognitive functioning, and interpersonal experience) and the regulation of your body's homeostasis

The somatosensory cortex, which plays a role in your body's ability to interpret a wide variety of sensations

The fact that this study showed any improvement at all is remarkable, considering they used commercial yogurt preparations that are notoriously unhealthy -- loaded with artificial sweeteners, colors, flavorings, and sugar. Most importantly, the vast majority of commercial yogurts have clinically insignificant levels of beneficial bacteria.

Clearly, you would be far better off making your own yogurt from raw milk or eating other fermented foods, like fermented vegetables, to support your gut health and mood.

As explained by Dr. Natasha Campbell-McBride, a medical doctor with a postgraduate degree in Neurology, toxicity in your gut can flow throughout your body and into your brain, where it can cause symptoms of poor mood, autism, ADHD, depression, schizophrenia, and a whole host of other mental and behavioral disorders.

With this in mind, it should be crystal clear that nourishing your gut flora (by eating fermented foods and avoiding processed foods and sugar) is extremely important to support a positive mood.

#### 4. Wild-Caught Alaskan Salmon

Found in salmon, sardines, and anchovies, or supplement form, such as krill oil, the animal-based omega-3 fats EPA and DHA play a role in your emotional well-being. There are a number of vendors, like Vital Choice, that have documented radiation free salmon.

One study in Brain Behavior and Immunity showed a dramatic 20 percent reduction in anxiety among medical students taking omega-3,<sup>11</sup> while past research has shown omega-3 fats work just as well as antidepressants in preventing the signs of depression, but without any of the side effects.

#### 5. Blueberries

Anthocyanins are the pigments that give berries like blueberries and blackberries their deep color. These antioxidants aid your brain in the production of dopamine, a chemical that is critical to coordination, memory function, and your mood. Also, as TIME reported:<sup>12</sup>

"Research has also shown that blueberry eaters experience a boost in natural killer cells, 'a type of white blood cell that plays a vital role in immunity, critical for countering stress,' says Cynthia Sass, MPH, RD, Health's contributing nutrition editor."

#### 6. Pistachios

One study found eating two servings of pistachios a day lowered vascular constriction during stress, which means the load on your heart is reduced since your arteries are more dilated.<sup>13</sup> Not to mention, you might find the rhythmic act of shelling pistachios therapeutic, as doing a repetitive activity can help quiet racing thoughts in your head.

Pistachios are at high risk of contamination by a carcinogenic mold called aflatoxin and may be bleached or fumigated during processing; choose organic pistachios and avoid those that are dyed, bleached, or show signs of decay.

#### 7. Dark Chocolate

If you're one of these individuals who gets a nice mood boost whenever you sink your teeth into a bar of pure, unadulterated chocolate, it is not happenstance. There's a chemical reason behind it called anandamide, a neurotransmitter produced in the brain that temporarily blocks feelings of pain and depression. It's a derivative of the Sanskrit word "bliss," and one of the great things about chocolate is that it not only produces this compound, it also contains other chemicals that prolong the "feel-good" aspects of anandamide.

Chocolate has even been referred to as "the new anti-anxiety drug." One study in the Journal of Psychopharmacology also revealed that drinking an antioxidant-rich chocolate drink equal to about 1.5 ounces of dark chocolate daily felt calmer than those who did not.<sup>14</sup>

## 8. Sunshine

It's not technically a food, but a daily dose of sunshine might help stabilize your mood. Serotonin, the brain hormone associated with mood elevation, rises with exposure to bright light and falls with decreased sun exposure. In 2006, scientists evaluated the effects of vitamin D on the mental health of 80 elderly patients and found those with the lowest levels of vitamin D were 11 times more prone to be depressed than those who received healthy doses.<sup>15</sup>

Low vitamin D levels are also associated with an increased risk of panic disorders.<sup>16</sup> While you can get some vitamin D in foods like salmon, egg yolks, and mushrooms, your best solution for optimizing your levels is through sensible sun exposure.

## 9. Seeds

Magnesium, which acts as a precursor for neurotransmitters like serotonin, is well-known for its role in helping to regulate your emotions and enhance well-being. Dr. Carolyn Dean, a medical and naturopathic doctor, has studied and written about magnesium for more than 15 years. The latest edition of her book, *The Magnesium Miracle*, details 22 medical areas that magnesium deficiency triggers, including anxiety, panic attacks, and depression.

Seaweed and green leafy vegetables like spinach and Swiss chard can be excellent sources of magnesium, as are some beans, nuts, and seeds, like pumpkin, sunflower, and sesame seeds. Avocados also contain magnesium. Juicing your vegetables is an excellent option to ensure you're getting enough of them in your diet.

## 10. Avocado

Avocados provide close to 20 essential health-boosting nutrients, including potassium, vitamin E, B vitamins, and folate, and, according to research published in the *Nutrition Journal*, eating just one-half of a fresh avocado with lunch may satiate you if you're overweight, which will help prevent unnecessary snacking later.<sup>17</sup>

Those who ate half an avocado with their standard lunch reported being 40 percent less hungry three hours after their meal, and 28 percent less hungry at the five-hour mark compared to those who did not eat avocado for lunch. The study also found that avocados appear helpful for regulating blood sugar levels. This combination of satiety and blood-sugar regulation can help keep your mood steady, even in times of stress.

Sugary, Starchy Foods Are the Worst Choices When You're Stressed

Many people equate "comfort" foods with carbs, but sugar and grains are among the worst foods to eat when you're stressed out. Here's why...

### 1. Sugar

Sugar can lead to fluctuations in blood sugar, which can bring on mood swings, but its role in poor mood actually goes much deeper than that. Entire books have been written on this topic, such as William Duffy's book, *Sugar Blues*. There are at least three potential mechanisms through which refined sugar intake could exert a toxic effect on your mood and mental health: By choosing healthy foods you can actually impact your mood on a positive note, helping to relieve tension, stabilize blood sugar, and send your stress packing.

Sugar (particularly fructose) and grains contribute to insulin and leptin resistance and impaired signaling, which play a significant role in your mental health

Sugar suppresses activity of BDNF, which promotes healthy brain neurons. BDNF levels are critically low in both depression and schizophrenia, which animal models suggest might actually be causative

Sugar consumption also triggers a cascade of chemical reactions in your body that promote chronic inflammation. In the long term, inflammation disrupts the normal functioning of your immune system, which is linked to a greater risk of depression

### 2. Gluten

Gluten, a protein found in grains such as wheat, rye, and barley, may negatively impact mood and brain health. In fact, a number of studies indicate that wheat can have a detrimental effect on mood,<sup>19</sup> promoting depression and even more serious mental health problems such as schizophrenia. One mechanism that can help explain the mysterious connection between wheat and mental health problems is the fact that wheat inhibits production of serotonin.

Neurotransmitters like serotonin can be found not just in your brain, but also in your gut. In fact, the greatest concentration of serotonin, which is involved in mood control, depression, and aggression, is found in your intestines, not your brain! Wheat in particular has also been implicated in psychiatric problems, from depression to schizophrenia, due to Wheat Germ Agglutinin (WGA), which has neurotoxic activity.

### 3. Processed Foods

The list of potentially mood-busting ingredients in processed foods is a long one. Aside from sugar and gluten, they may also contain trans fats, artificial colors, monosodium glutamate (MSG), artificial sweeteners, and other synthetic ingredients linked to irritability and poor mood.

### What Else Works for Stress Relief?

Your diet plays an important role in stress management, but using energy psychology techniques such as the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) can help reprogram your body's reactions to the unavoidable stressors of everyday life, thereby reducing your chances of experiencing adverse

health effects. Exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, and meditation are also important "release valves" that can help you manage your stress.

EFT was developed in the 1990s by Gary Craig, a Stanford engineering graduate specializing in healing and self-improvement. It's akin to acupuncture, which is based on the concept that a vital energy flows through your body along invisible pathways known as meridians. EFT stimulates different energy meridian points in your body by tapping them with your fingertips, while simultaneously using custom-made verbal affirmations. This can be done alone or under the supervision of a qualified EFT therapist. By doing so, you help your body eliminate emotional "scarring" and reprogram the way your body responds to emotional stressors. Since these stressors are usually connected to physical problems, your physical symptoms can improve or disappear as well.

For a demonstration, please see the following video featuring EFT practitioner Julie Schiffman, in which she discusses EFT for stress relief. However, for serious problems, it is far preferable to see an experienced EFT therapist in person, as there is a significant art to the process that requires a high level of sophistication if serious problems are to be successfully treated.