

EAT YOUR WAY TO A *better mood*

We all know to avoid emotional eating, but did you know that by eating the right foods we can improve our mood, decrease blood pressure and reduce stress levels? Freelance writer Lisa Evans gives us tips on how to amend our diets to reduce stress and reach emotional and physical well-being.

We all know the health risks of stress. High stress levels have been linked to heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Stress can also affect our mood, making us irritable and even prone to depression. By making small changes to our diet we can reduce the stress in our lives, which will in turn have a positive results on our physical health and also elevate our moods and mental well-being. So read on and get started on your next grocery list.

RELAX WITH SOME OJ

Vitamin C-rich foods, such as oranges, grapefruit, red peppers and strawberries lower levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol, and boost the body's immune system, relieving stress on our organs. Cortisol is our body's stress-response hormone. Cortisol levels rise when we're under pressure and can cause our muscles to feel tense and our mind to be anxious, putting us in a sour mood. Vitamin C helps to stabilize cortisol production and as a result uplift our spirits.



CARB CONTROL

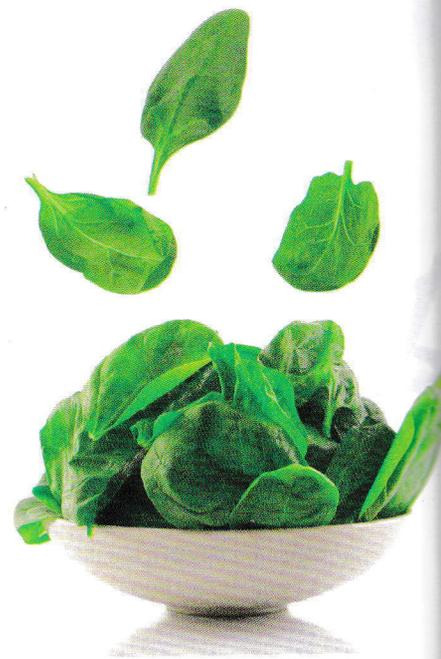
That urge to reach for the chips and cracker drawer when we're feeling down is our body's way of boosting serotonin levels to feel better. Elizabeth Somer, nutritionist and author of *Eat Your Way to Happiness* says our bodies are rigged to stock up on carbohydrates when we feel gloomy. "All carb snacks, whether it's a handful of jellybeans or air-popped popcorn, will raise brain levels of serotonin," says Somer. While high-glycemic index carbs, such as muffins and donuts, boost serotonin levels quickly giving us an instant pick-me-up, the effect is short-lived and often leaves us more tired and moody than before we ate. "Refined carbs tend to wreak havoc on our blood sugar levels and waistline," says Somer.

Boost serotonin levels without the blood sugar rollercoaster and without weight gain by choosing whole grain carbs that keep blood sugar levels even. Oatmeal, whole wheat toast or air-popped popcorn are good options. As a rule of thumb serotonin levels drop around 4 pm and then again around 9 pm," says Toronto naturopathic doctor Tara Andresen. So keep whole-grain snacks handy mid-afternoon and late evening.



BEAT PMS WITH SPINACH

Magnesium-rich foods, such as spinach and pumpkin seeds, can lower stress levels and control pre-menstrual mood swings. Magnesium is required along with vitamin B6 (also found in spinach) to produce serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is known as the body's natural "feel-good hormone" and appetite suppressant, relieving mood-related symptoms of PMS and food cravings. "If you're feeling grumpy, impatient, tired, angry or depressed, you may have low levels of serotonin," says Andresen, adding serotonin levels are often lower during the last week of a woman's menstrual cycle. Magnesium-rich foods can also help control anxiety and depression. "Anxiety leads to an increase in catecholamines, which then leads to a deficiency of magnesium," says Andresen.



FIGHT DEPRESSION WITH OMEGA-3S

Omega-3 DHA found in fatty fish, such as salmon, improves brain health, memory and concentration. Omega-3s also assist in warding off dementia, but what you may not know is that “omega-3 DHA has been found to boost mood serotonin levels,” says Somer. Cultures that eat the most fatty fish have up to a 60 per cent reduction in depression compared to cultures that eat little to no salmon. Eat a 3-oz serving of fatty fish twice a week to get these mood-altering benefits.



BEDTIME SNACK

Getting the recommended seven to eight hours of shut-eye may help to improve our mood, but if our nights are filled with tossing and turning, eating a carb snack before bed may be the answer. “Serotonin not only helps improve your mood, but can also help you sleep,” says Somer. Particularly, warm milk can also help to raise your body temperature, helping you feel rested. “It’s kind of like having an internal bubble bath,” says Somer. ☺

