



10 Happy Foods: by author Stephanie Raymond

If the long, bleak winter has you feeling blue, cheer up—a sunnier disposition could be as close as your refrigerator.

While the effect food has on our physical health is undeniable, research is connecting food to our emotional health as well.

The following 10 foods have mood-lifting properties that may help you shake off the winter blahs.



1: salmon

This heart-healthy fish is packed full of omega-3 fatty acid and vitamin D, two nutrients that have been shown to increase levels of the feel-good neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain.

A clinical study found that over the course of five years, individuals suffering from depression significantly reduced their feelings of sadness and hostility by eating a healthy diet that included fatty fish two to three times per week.

Salmon is also one of the few dietary sources of vitamin D. Studies have linked low levels of this sunshine vitamin to depression and seasonal affective disorder.

HOW MUCH: One 3.5 oz (100 g) serving of wild salmon contains approximately 360 IU of vitamin D, 90 percent of the recommended daily value, and 87 percent of the daily recommended value of omega-3 fatty acid.

SERVE IT: Baked, broiled, or grilled, salmon goes well with an array of vegetables. Serve on a bed of brown rice or whole grain pasta for an added serotonin boost.

2: yogourt

For women experiencing PMS-associated moodiness, a cup of yogourt may be just the pick-me-up they need.

A small study found that women suffering from PMS were less irritable, weepy, and depressed when they ate a daily diet consisting of 1,300 mg of calcium versus 600 mg.

HOW MUCH: Containing 415 mg of calcium per cup (250 mL), plain, low-fat yogourt provides 42 percent of the daily recommended value of calcium.

SERVE IT: For a mood-elevating treat, top a 1/2 cup (125 mL) of plain, low-fat yogourt with crushed walnuts and antioxidant-rich blueberries.

3: walnuts

This antioxidant-rich nut is an excellent source of serotonin-boosting omega-3 fatty acids and magnesium, a mineral that helps stabilize mood by regulating blood sugar levels.

Clinical studies have found that a dietary deficiency of magnesium combined with excess calcium and stress may cause symptoms associated with depression including agitation, anxiety, irritability, and insomnia. Although more research is needed, magnesium may also alleviate mood swings associated with PMS.

HOW MUCH: One 1 oz (30 g) serving of walnuts provides 43 percent of the daily recommended value of magnesium and 95 percent of the daily recommended value of omega-3 fatty acid.

SERVE IT: Eaten alone, walnuts make a great mood- and energy-boosting snack. A handful of walnuts can also be a tasty addition to oatmeal, salads, or stir-fries.

4: popcorn

Carbs cause serotonin levels to soar, making us feel happy and relaxed. Unfortunately, not all carbs are created equal. The best carbs are the ones that are both low-glycemic and high in fibre. This includes carbs from fruits, vegetables, and whole grains such as popcorn.

As the brain runs on glucose, slow-absorbing complex carbs provide a fuel source that is more sustainable and nutrient rich than the fuel we get from simple sugars such as cake and cookies.

HOW MUCH: *Canada's Food Guide* recommends adults eat six to eight servings of grains a day, half of which should be whole grains. Two cups (500 mL) of air-popped popcorn equals one serving of whole grain.

SERVE IT: Skip the butter and drizzle air-popped popcorn with heart-healthy extra-virgin olive oil and a sprinkling of Parmesan cheese. For a real mood-lifting treat, drizzle popcorn with melted dark chocolate.

5: bananas

Rich in energy-producing potassium, mood-elevating magnesium, and vitamin B₆, a banana with breakfast will get your day off to a good start.

Vitamin B₆ is essential for the synthesis of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine in the brain and may reduce symptoms of depression. Vitamin B₆ is also a popular remedy for treating the symptoms of PMS. Unfortunately, current research hasn't been able to support this claim.

HOW MUCH: One banana has 34 percent of the daily recommended value of vitamin B₆.

SERVE IT: Blend banana with low-fat yogurt, skim milk, and your favourite berries for a mood-boosting smoothie. Cheer up with a childhood favourite: a peanut butter and banana sandwich made with whole wheat bread.

6: dark chocolate

The ultimate comfort food, dark chocolate contains high levels of the amino acid phenylalanine.

Although more research is needed, some clinical evidence has suggested that phenylalanine may be an effective treatment for depression, as it enhances production of the mood-elevating chemicals dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain.

HOW MUCH: For best effect, choose chocolate that is at least 70 percent cacao. As chocolate is high in calories, remember less really is more when indulging in this sweet treat.

SERVE IT: Make your own mood-boosting trail mix by adding a handful of mini semisweet chocolate chips and calcium-rich slivered almonds to whole grain cereal. Melt a few squares of dark chocolate and dip antioxidant-rich strawberries into it.

7: oysters

Considered by many to be an aphrodisiac, oysters not only create feelings of love in some, but also are exceptionally high in zinc, a trace mineral that calms the body and stabilizes mood.

When under stress, zinc reserves in the body can become depleted. Lower levels of zinc can lead to mood swings and agitation. Increasing dietary zinc levels may help ease anxiety and may have an antidepressant effect.

HOW MUCH: Oysters contain more zinc per serving than any other food. Six medium oysters provide over 500 percent of the daily recommended value.

SERVE IT: Eat them on their own or alongside folate-rich vegetables such as asparagus and broccoli, carb-heavy crusty whole wheat bread, or clam chowder. (See alive's [love-inspired meal for two](#) for deliciously simple ways to serve oysters.)

8: brazil nuts

If you're stuck in a foul mood, a handful of Brazil nuts may be just the thing needed to cheer you up. Brazil nuts are one of the most concentrated food sources of free radical-fighting selenium, a trace mineral that when deficient can lead to feelings of hostility, irritability, anxiety, and depression.

In one study, participants who ate a diet high in selenium for 15 weeks reported feeling more confident, clear-headed, and elated, while those who ate a diet low in this essential mineral reported feeling worse.

HOW MUCH: Just 1 oz (30 g) of dried, blanched Brazil nuts provide a whopping 780 percent of the daily recommended value of selenium.

SERVE IT: Eat them alone as a snack, add them to trail mix, toss a handful into a salad, or crush them to make a delicious ice cream topping.

9: spinach

It may have been the abundance of iron in this leafy green that made Popeye strong, but it was most likely the folate that kept him happy.

Several clinical studies have linked depression to folate deficiency, as low levels of this essential B vitamin appear to reduce the amount of mood-regulating serotonin, dopamine, and noradrenaline produced in the brain.

HOW MUCH: Half a cup (125 mL) of frozen, boiled spinach contains 25 percent of the daily recommended level of folate; while one cup (250 mL) of fresh, uncooked spinach contains 15 percent.

SERVE IT: Replace lettuce with iron- and folate-rich spinach in any salad, sandwich, or wrap. It also makes a great addition to pasta dishes.

10: turkey

At the centre of many festive feasts, turkey is not just for the holidays anymore. It's high in protein, low in fat, and is a good source of selenium, vitamin B₆, and tryptophan.

Tryptophan is essential for the production of mood-enhancing niacin and serotonin, and acts as a mild sedative that promotes sleep.

Choose organic turkey whenever possible. The stress-free lifestyle and balanced diet make for a much tastier bird.

HOW MUCH: One 4 oz (115 g) serving of turkey has almost 110 percent of the daily recommended value of this relaxing amino acid.

SERVE IT: Next time you cook chili, replace the ground beef with ground turkey. Add sliced turkey to a green salad for an instant protein boost.

More mood-boosting tips

To stay healthy and happy, registered dietician Brenda Arychuk recommends:

- Instead of focusing on just one mood-boosting nutrient, concentrate on eating a balanced diet to minimize nutritional deficiencies.
- Reduce your intake of bad fats (saturated and trans), and increase your intake of good fats such as omega-3 fatty acid.
- Don't skip meals. Three meals and two to three snacks each day will give your brain constant fuel.
- Skip the sugary and fatty snacks, as they cause blood sugar levels to spike.
- Avoid low-carb diets. Carbs are good for you when you eat the right ones.
- Take a vitamin D supplement daily and, depending on your dairy intake, a calcium one too.