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# Mood and Food

**What we eat truly does affect our mental health and our mood. BSS Psychologist Christine Martins gives us the lowdown on five key foods that positively affect our mood. And the good news is, these foods are mostly easy to stock in a remote area pantry or fridge!**

What we eat affects our blood sugar levels and brain chemicals (neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, dopamine and acetylcholine) which, in turn, affects the way we feel.

When our blood sugar levels fluctuate, our mood and energy levels change. The negative effects of fluctuating blood sugar levels include irritability, poor concentration, fatigue, depression and food cravings. And when the brain chemical levels change, it influences the way we think, feel and behave.

By eating the right foods, you can take control and give yourself an emotional edge to the day.

## 1) Oatmeal

Oatmeal may help if you find yourself feeling irritable and cranky. It is rich in soluble fibre, which helps to smooth out blood sugar levels by slowing the absorption of sugar into the blood. Oatmeal is also a great food to help you stick with your diet plan, because the soluble fibre in oatmeal forms a gel that slows the emptying of your stomach so you don't feel hungry quickly.

## 2) Walnuts/Nuts

Walnuts have long been thought of as a "brain food" because of their wrinkled, bi-lobed (brainlike) appearance. Now we know that walnuts are an excellent source of omega-3 essential fatty acids, a type of fat that's needed for brain cells and mood-lifting neurotransmitters to function properly and possibly help some people with depression.

## 3) Salmon/Tinned fish

Other foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids include salmon, sardines, flaxseeds, and omega-3 fortified eggs.

## 4) Lentils

A member of the legume family, lentils are an excellent source of folate, a B vitamin that appears to be essential for mood and proper nerve function in the brain. Low levels of folate have been linked to depression. (Alpert and Fava, 2009). Although researchers don't yet fully understand the connection, folate deficiency appears to impair the metabolism of serotonin, dopamine, and noradrenaline, all of which are neurotransmitters important for mood. A cup of cooked lentils provides 90% of the recommended daily allowance of folic acid. A healthy bonus: lentils contain protein and fibre, which are filling and help to stabilise blood sugar. Other sources of folate include: fortified breakfast cereals, green vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, liver, and beans.

## 5) Bananas

Bananas are a powerhouse of nutritional value. They contain three natural sugars - sucrose, fructose and glucose combined with fibre. A banana gives an instant, sustained and substantial boost of energy. Research has shown that just two bananas provide enough energy for a strenuous 90-minute workout. No wonder the banana is the number one fruit with the world's leading athletes. But energy isn't the only way a banana can help us keep fit. It can also help overcome or prevent a substantial number of illnesses and conditions, making it a must to add to our daily diet. Many people experiencing depression report they feel much better after eating a banana. This is because bananas contain tryptophan, a type of protein that the body converts into serotonin, known to induce relaxation, improve mood levels and generally helps us to feel happier.



Also, the vitamin B6 it contains regulates blood glucose levels, which can affect your mood. High in iron, bananas can stimulate the production of haemoglobin in the blood and so helps in cases of anaemia.

This unique tropical fruit is extremely high in potassium yet low in salt, making it perfect to beat blood pressure. So much so, the US Food and Drug Administration has allowed the banana industry to make official claims for the fruit's ability to reduce the risk of blood pressure and stroke.

Serotonin, one of the key neurotransmitters influencing our mood, is often referred to as the "feel good" hormone. In the past few years, research has suggested that vitamin D may increase the levels of serotonin. We get vitamin D mainly through exposure to sunlight and in lesser amounts, through food. Eating highly spiced foods and chocolate have been linked to production of higher levels of serotonin.

#### **When to eat**

When you eat is another important factor. Most people need to eat a well proportioned meal 3-4 hourly. A small amount of protein eaten at regular intervals (each 3-4 hours) allows energy to be maintained at optimum levels through serum blood sugar level regulation.

Easy-to-source protein includes tinned fish (tuna, salmon, sardines), nuts, baked beans, milk, yoghurt or cheese. As well as providing nutrients, these eating strategies help smooth out the negative effects of fluctuating blood sugar levels.

#### **A word of warning**

Although caffeine has been shown to lead to a more positive mood and improved performance, it requires caution. Too much caffeine can make you nervous, irritable, hypersensitive or bring on headaches. It can also have dependency issues.