

How to boost your mood through food

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You've had a bad breakup, a rotten day at work or you're just too exhausted to cook. You're craving comfort, something to soothe your mood. So, you reach for ... a salad?

Probably not. But if it's happiness you want, those [leafy greens](#) are a far better choice than a tub of ice cream or a bowl of mac and cheese.

"You might have an initial nice feeling, but comfort foods are ultimately discomfort for the brain," said Dr. Uma Naidoo, a nutritional psychiatrist, chef and director of nutritional and metabolic psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Eating ice cream and high-carb foods feels good because it sends tryptophan to the brain, said Naidoo, who wrote a book published in 2020 that explored the connections between [food](#), mood and the brain. Tryptophan is an amino acid that helps the body make serotonin, a mood-boosting hormone. But that [good feeling](#) can become addictive, causing the body to crave foods that will ultimately lower mood as it also raises [blood sugar](#). Foods high in sugar, refined flour or saturated fats activate inflammation, which is strongly linked to depression.

Conversely, research suggests eating a diet high in fruits, vegetables, fish and [whole grains](#) can lower your risk for depression by fighting inflammation. For every 100 grams of fruits or vegetables consumed, the risk for depression falls by up to 5%, according to a meta-analysis of 18 studies published in the *British Journal of Nutrition* in 2018.

But since salads don't generate an immediate pleasure bump, people don't associate them with positive moods. And we're not taught to think of them that way, Naidoo said. "Doctors don't say, 'Eat your leafy green vegetables because they will ultimately improve your mood.' People need to understand the purpose of eating a colorful salad."

Another reason people don't reach for healthy foods to improve mood is they "don't necessarily eat for health," said Michel Lucas, an associate professor in the department of social and [preventive medicine](#) at Laval University School of Medicine in Quebec City.

"Eating is a social act and linked to our cultural and emotional memory," he said. For example, foods that spark childhood memories can bring comfort, whether they're good for our bodies or not.

"We often forget that eating is a pleasure," said Lucas, who suggested people try eating a greater variety of fresh, whole foods and experiment with cooking to discover new tastes and experiences, using spices that bring out food's natural flavors.

"We need to have a different relationship with the food we are eating," he said. "If you like lemon, fresh lemon zest is completely different than the taste of artificial lemon juice. Stay away from the ultra-processed, from the experience of that."

Eating whole foods and an overall plant-based diet is the best way to maximize the intake of mood-boosting foods, Lucas said. But eating something that's not good for you occasionally is fine. "What's more important is what you eat day to day."

Naidoo suggests incorporating dietary changes slowly. Begin by cutting back on foods that drive depression. These include processed, highly refined foods with little fiber, such as junk foods and fast foods that are cooked with processed [vegetable oils](#), trans fats, artificial sweeteners and foods with added sugars.

"Then add in fiber-rich foods and foods with a lot of folate," an essential nutrient that has been shown to alleviate depression, she said. "These are very important to help your mood" and can be found in dark, leafy greens, fruit, nuts, beans, peas, fish and other foods. Spinach, Brussels sprouts and asparagus are especially high in folates.

Many spices, such as ginger, turmeric and black pepper, also help fight inflammation, she said. So do omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish and

flaxseed.

Just don't expect immediate results, Naidoo said.

"This is not a quick fix. It's not an overnight thing," she said. "If you just have turmeric once, it's not going to change your mood. But if you incorporate this into your lifestyle, cook with garlic on a daily basis, add a little bit of spice, add more vegetables to your diet, more beans and seeds and nuts, over time you will start to see the difference."

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