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The fungi to choose to give you a health boost

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Although mushrooms are a fungi and in a kingdom of their own, separate from plants and animals, the good news is, they count as one of your five-a-day.



An 80g portion – about 15 button, four large closed cup, or one large flat mushroom – is packed with nutrition and is a useful and tasty part of a healthy diet.

“Mushrooms are a great food to include in your diet,” says dietitian Clare Thornton-Wood (claretw.com), a spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association (bda.uk.com), who points out they have a strong ‘umami’ flavour (not sweet, sour, salty, or bitter, and often referred to as the ‘fifth taste’), due to the glutamates they contain.

“They’re packed with nutrients and low in calories and salt and contain no fat, and make an excellent replacement for meat.”

While there are many different varieties, the white mushroom is the most common. One portion contains around 2.5-3g of protein, 21 calories, 1g of fibre, and no fat – and pack quite a punch in the vitamin and mineral stakes. Here’s a look...

1. VITAMIN D FOR THE IMMUNE SYSTEM AND BONE HEALTH

Mushrooms are one of the few non-animal sources of vitamin D, apart from fortified products, says Clare. Vitamin D is essential in supporting a normal immune system and plays a vital role in keeping bones healthy, as it works to regulate our intake of calcium, magnesium and phosphorous. “Vitamin D deficiency is common in the UK, as we only make vitamin D from the sun during the months of April to September, and there are very few good food sources,” says Clare, who stresses that government advice is that adults and children should take a vitamin D supplement of 10ug per day. She explains mushrooms make vitamin D in a similar way to humans, by the action of sunlight on their surface, which converts ergosterol (a compound found in fungi cells) into a form of vitamin D. “The more exposure to light the mushrooms have, the higher the vitamin D content. It’s highest in wild mushrooms, such as chanterelles or morels, and lowest in those grown inside in the dark, which includes most of those you find in supermarkets. However, some producers deliberately expose them to ultraviolet light, either via sunlight or a UV lamp.”

Noel Hegarty, of UK & Ireland Mushroom Producers (mushrooms aremagic.co.uk) says British and Irish growers are enriching mushrooms with vitamin D, with just eight providing 100% of the daily recommended intake.

“If you can’t get your hands on vitamin D-enriched mushrooms and can only find regular mushrooms, place them on the windowsill when the sun’s out, and they become a source of vitamin D,” he says.

It’s best to expose mushrooms to sunlight between 10am and 3pm for up to 60 minutes.

2. A GOOD SOURCE OF ANTIOXIDANTS

Mushrooms are also one of the leading sources of the powerful antioxidant selenium – which is often lacking in many people’s diets.

3.

Mushrooms contain beta-glucan, a form of soluble fibre which can help lower cholesterol, ensure your bowels stay regular, and help manage blood-sugar levels.

KEEP BOWELS HEALTHY

4. HEALTHIER BLOOD PRESSURE

Mushrooms are a rich source of potassium too, which can help reduce the negative impact sodium (salt) can have on the body. Potassium also lessens the tension in blood vessels, potentially helping reduce blood pressure, says Noel.

5. B VITAMINS FOR THE BRAIN, EYES, NERVES AND BLOOD

B vitamins help the body release energy from food and are important for the formation of red blood cells and brain function, says Clare – and mushrooms are packed with them.