

Happiness ON A PLATE

Put a smile on your face this spring with these expert-approved foods

Feel sluggish and low after a carby or sugar-loaded blowout? What we put into our bodies can have a big impact on our mood.

This is because the gut-brain axis is connected by millions of nerves that transmit messages in both directions. So just as you might experience a 'knot' in your stomach when you're sad, if you eat food that disrupts the gut bacteria, you can feel low almost instantly. Here's what to add to your grocery list to keep both your tum and mind happy.

Avocados

Loaded with healthy unsaturated fat, this green fruit can protect your heart, help with digestion and improve mood. Avocados are natural hormone balancers, which allow your brain to make the right chemicals needed to ensure you feel good. However, even healthy fat can contribute to weight gain, so you still need to watch your portions. Stick to roughly 50g (one-third) of an avocado per serving, and enjoy up to twice a week, sprinkled on salad or blended into a smoothie.

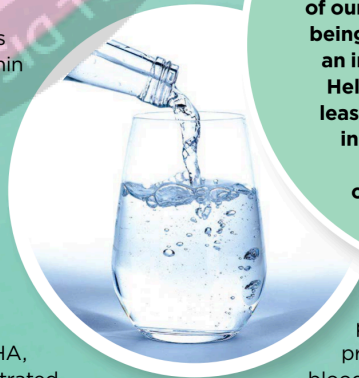
Chicken and turkey

These lean meats are both good sources of mood-boosting tryptophan. This essential amino acid helps increase melatonin in the brain, which

regulates sleep and is vital for a healthy mind and body, says dietician Helen Bond.

Salmon

This power food is packed with vitamin B12 – a vital vitamin for steering clear of depression and maintaining mental health. Salmon also contains mood-stabilising fatty acids. Omega-3 fats, especially DHA, are highly concentrated in the brain and are important for normal brain function and overall mental health, says Helen.



70%

of our brain is made up of water, so being dehydrated is going to have an impact on how we're feeling. Helen recommends drinking at least 1.6ltr every day – and more in warm weather or if you're active – to avoid poor concentration, headaches and low mood.

potassium – known to lower blood pressure. To avoid mood-affecting blood-sugar highs and lows, eat bananas before they fully ripen as this will reduce the amount of sugar they contain.

Bananas

This fantastic and popular lunch-box filler is also packed with amino acid tryptophan, along with vitamins B6 and C, which help support everything from your immune system to your eye health, plus

Dark chocolate

With high levels of phenols, this sweet treat helps the brain to release 'happy' endorphins and increase positivity, says nutritionist Anita Bean. To reap the benefits, always ensure you opt for 70% dark chocolate or higher. But, sadly, gorging on it won't make you happier than sticking to the recommended daily allowance – in fact, doing this will simply be expanding your waistline. Savour one to two squares of dark chocolate, two to three times a week.

Strawberries

These brightly coloured berries taste great and are rich in vitamin C, which means they contribute to producing happy chemicals in the brain.



Health and wellbeing

THE MOOD KILLERS

Limiting these favourites can help to keep you feeling upbeat

Processed food

While certainly tasty, foods including ready meals, cakes and pastries and meat, such as sausages and bacon, can cause inflammation in the brain, which has been linked to depression. Get into the habit of reading food labels and choose ones with low sugar, salt and saturated fat. And set aside a day of the week to batch-cook meals from scratch so you don't resort to unhealthy time-savers such as takeaways.

Gluten

Aside from stomach cramps, fatigue and headaches, a sensitivity to gluten – found in food such as pasta, bread and certain sauces and soups – can also cause low mood. It's believed that gluten may limit tryptophan in the body, which can limit levels of the happy hormone serotonin. Fill up on naturally gluten-free food, such as fruit, vegetables, seafood and eggs, but speak to your GP before cutting out any major food groups.

Energy drinks

They might give you that desired 'buzz' when you're flagging, but relying on this quick pick-me-up, can have the opposite effect. Their high sugar and caffeine content can lead to sugar crashes, 'jitters', irritability and difficulty sleeping. Limit your intake to one-two drinks a day and opt for low-sugar varieties.

Sesame seeds

These contain tyrosine – an amino acid that boosts the happy hormone, dopamine, in the brain. Stir into salads and soups, or add them to a smoothie.

Raw nuts

'All nuts are rich in plant protein, fibre, unsaturated fats, vitamin E and magnesium – a nutrient that is important for psychological wellbeing,' advises Helen. Have no more than 30g (a small handful) a day as they are high in fat.

Oats

Making wholegrain carbs part of your breakfast routine can

help to stabilise your mood throughout the day. They release their energy slowly, keeping blood-sugar levels steady – so they're better for refuelling the brain and enhancing mental wellbeing, says Helen. Get creative in the kitchen by preparing overnight oats with low-fat yogurt and a sprinkle of fruit.

Spinach

A generally great, incredibly nutritious leafy green veggie that's full of vitamins, spinach is also high in iron. 'Extreme tiredness, poor concentration and low mood can all be attributed to anaemia – an energy-zapping condition caused by low iron levels,' says Helen.



IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH, SEE YOUR GP. PHOTOS: GETTY