- Foods / Bones / Heart / Digestion

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'Help yourself'

Experts say the food on your plate can affect everything from your bones, heart and gut, to your mental health. Here's the scoop.

BY ALYSSA JUNG

'You are what you eat' isn't just a cheeky phrase used by doctors and health experts to trick us into eating a healthy diet – it's actually very, very true. If you feed your body nourishing foods, your inner workings will have a greater opportunity to flourish, and so will you. But if you fill it with junk, your internal systems will falter and your health will start to reflect that.

That's why "it's never too late to start eating healthier – the changes you make at any age can elevate your health," says internal medicine specialist and researcher Dr William Li. "True healthcare is what we do between visits to the doctor; our everyday habits when it comes to diet and lifestyle make all the difference in the world when it comes to staying vibrant and warding off disease."

Being healthy takes a lot of hard work on your body's part. A slew of factors – such as the presence of inflammation, how strong your heart is, your gut-health status, whether your skeleton is sturdy, and how you feel mentally – influence overall health. But you can support your body by learning how to make food its daily medicine. A balanced diet is an essential part of what your body needs to run from day to day, and specific nutrients can aid in healing what needs help (such as blood pressure that's a smidgen too high or muscle mass that could use a boost). Here's how to turn food into one of your most useful health tools. ►



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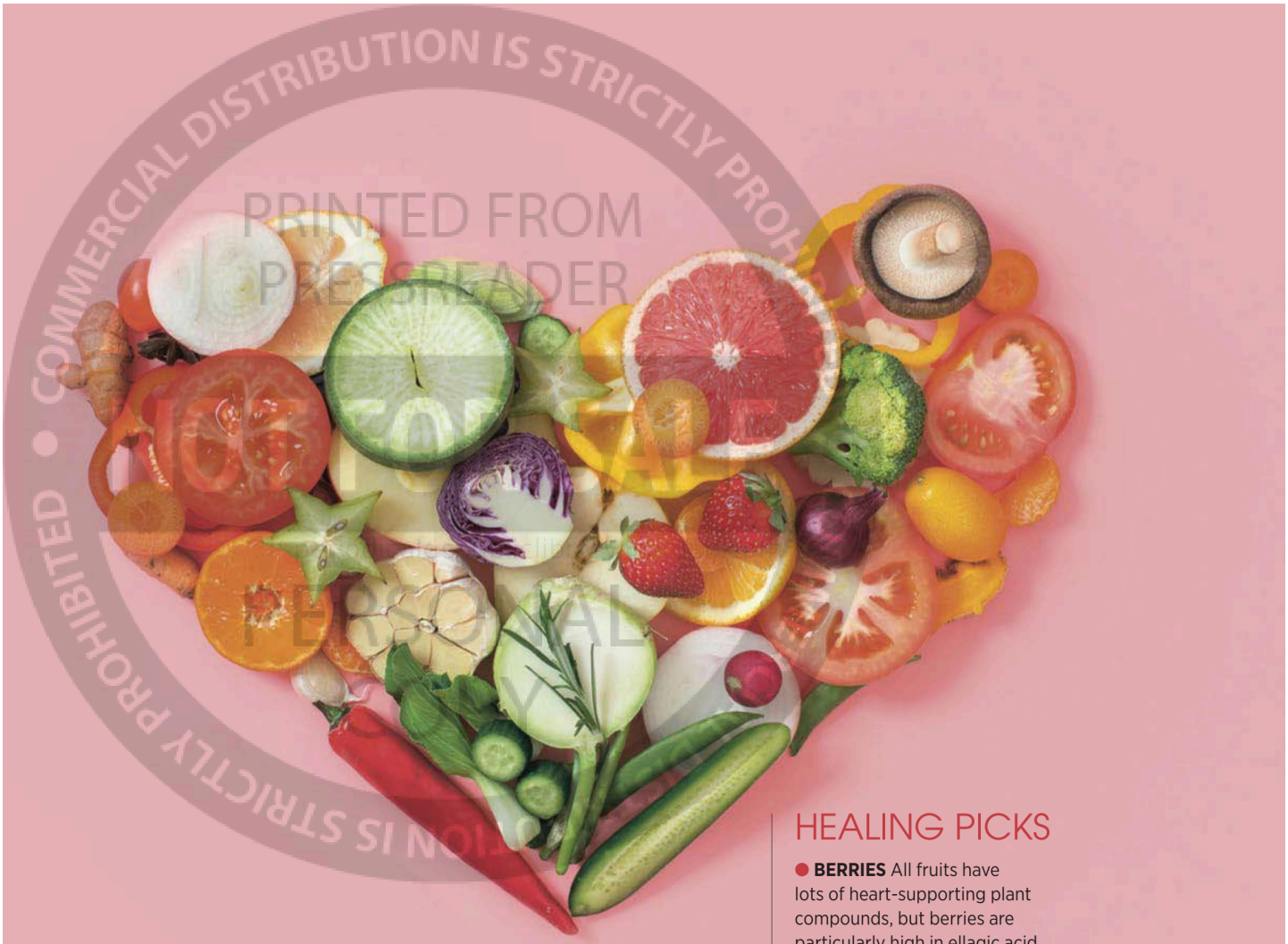

Help your heart

There's no overstating the link between nutrition and heart health. The right foods can fuel your ticker by supporting functions such as heart rhythm and desirable things such as stable blood sugar, healthy cholesterol levels and blood pressure control, dietitian Marisa Moore says.

However, "No 'supernutrient' does it all, so the best way to eat for your heart is to focus on a diverse array of foods that contain polyphenols and fibre," Dr Li says. "Just as important is to cut down on ultra-processed foods, which are filled with additives that can damage your cardiovascular system."

Studies show that a Mediterranean eating style (wholegrains, lots of fruit and vegies, lean protein such as fish, and healthy fats such as from olive oil, legumes and nuts) provides a heart-healthy mix, but the foods on the right are especially heart-smart.

HEALING PICKS

- **BERRIES** All fruits have lots of heart-supporting plant compounds, but berries are particularly high in ellagic acid, which research says may protect against heart disease, says Dr Li.
- **CITRUS AND MELON** These are replete with potassium, a mineral that "often flies under the radar when it comes to heart health, but helps maintain normal blood pressure levels," says Marisa.
- **BEANS** Plant sterols and soluble fibre in legumes help keep cholesterol in check, Marisa says, and magnesium aids in regulating heartbeat and warding off diabetes, a heart disease risk factor.
- **OLIVE OIL** This cooking staple, just like whole olives, features hydroxytyrosol, a heart-protective antioxidant, says Dr Li.
- **TOMATOES** Red and pink produce, such as tomatoes, pink grapefruit, pink guava and watermelon, boasts lycopene, which helps nurture and protect the endothelial cells that feed heart muscle and make up blood vessel linings, Dr Li says.

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Make over mental health

When you think about how intertwined food and cognitive health are, it's no surprise that what you eat also impacts mental health, in a couple of ways. For one, "nutrition plays a direct role in hormone and neurotransmitter synthesis, influencing mood-regulating chemicals like serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine," explains dietitian Laura Iu.

There has also been a lot of research on how specific vitamins and minerals influence mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression. Two types of omega-3 fatty acids (EPA and DHA) have been shown to help reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety, and they aid in nerve cell function and neurotransmitter regulation. And sometimes food can boost your mood simply because of how it makes you feel; through tastes, textures or nostalgia. "Comfort foods have got a bad rap for being 'unhealthy', but enjoying them from time to time is important for everyone," says neuropsychologist Dr Judy Ho.

To make feel-good meals really meaningful, Dr Ho recommends that, before you dig in, you shift your thinking to be more mindful. "Make the first few bites ceremonial and really savour them," she adds. "Own your decision to enjoy a 'treat' and appreciate the experience."



PHOTOGRAPHY: ISTOCK

Scaling it down

Salmon is packed with vitamin B12, which has been shown to help prevent mood disorders and dementias such as Alzheimer's disease.

HEALING PICKS

- **SALMON** It delivers healthy fats and vitamin D, two essentials for managing anxiety and depression. Low levels of the 'sunshine vitamin' have been associated with increased risk of depression and anxiety, Laura says, and fat impacts how mood-related chemicals and hormones function.
- **OATS** Wholegrains, such as oats, are complex carbs and help regulate blood sugar for a more stable mood. They also provide B vitamins, which contribute to the production of serotonin, a brain chemical that elicits feelings of relaxation and wellness, says Dr Ho.
- **NUTS AND SEEDS** These are a source of omega-3s, which help keep stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, under control, explains Dr Ho. Olive oil and avocados are also rich in these healthy fatty acids.
- **DARK CHOCOLATE** It's lower in sugar than milk chocolate, which means less risk of an energy crash, and it contains antioxidants that tend to boost positive emotions, says Dr Ho.
- **DAIRY** Milk, cheese and yoghurt could contribute to reducing and preventing depressive symptoms. "A recent large study found that, as calcium intake increased, symptoms of depression decreased," says Dr Ho. "Vitamin D may also help improve mood by elevating serotonin levels in the brain." ►

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Did you know?

About 20 to 30 minutes of moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, has been found to have anti-inflammatory effects.

SOURCE: BRAIN, BEHAVIOUR AND IMMUNITY

Tame inflammation

Fighting chronic inflammation is the wellness world's latest obsession, and unlike with some of the wackier fads (like TikTok trend the 'internal shower'), there's a lot to this one. Inflammation is the body's natural defence system that's deployed here and there to help us heal from injury or illness, but it does become an issue when it sticks around too long and causes damage to cells, tissues and organs that affects how well they function. This is a big deal because, over time, it may contribute to the development of diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes, says dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner. "The good news is that eating a varied, nutrient-rich diet can help support the body's natural ability to regulate inflammation," she adds.



HEALING PICKS

- **COLOURFUL FRUIT AND VEGIES** Bright foods, such as berries, apples, cabbage, carrots, broccoli, beetroot and capsicum, are rich in antioxidants and other anti-inflammatory compounds.
- **FIBRE-FILLED FOODS** A healthy gut helps regulate inflammation, so foods high in fibre, such as beans, lentils and wholegrains, feed good gut bacteria to promote microbiome balance. (You also need a stream of good bacteria, so don't forget probiotic foods.)
- **HEALTHY FATS** Polyunsaturated fats (omega-3s are among them) and monounsaturated fats help decrease inflammation, Dawn says. Fish, such as salmon and trout, nuts and seeds, olives, avocados and olive oil are all sources of these green-light fats.
- **MAGNESIUM-RICH FOODS** "Research shows that magnesium can act like an antioxidant to fight inflammation," says Dawn. Spinach, pumpkin seeds, tuna, brown rice, black beans, almonds, avocados, bananas and dark chocolate are all excellent sources of this mineral.
- **HERBS AND SPICES** These seasonings not only make food taste good, but also contribute anti-inflammatory power.

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Support your skeleton

Bone density and muscle mass naturally decline as we age, which can lead to conditions such as osteoporosis and increase the risk of falls or fractures, all of which may affect your mobility and quality of life. Plus, "muscle is known as 'the longevity organ', meaning the more muscle you have, the longer you may live and the healthier you may be," Dawn says. "More muscle is associated with better immunity and healthy cholesterol, triglyceride, blood pressure and blood sugar levels."

It's crucial to support and strengthen your bones and muscles. In addition to using weights a few times a week, loading up on foods that are high in the right nutrients is another powerful way to do that, says Marisa. "Minerals like calcium and phosphorus are the building blocks of bone, and vitamin D is necessary for calcium absorption," she explains. "Magnesium and protein are also key for bone and muscle health." If you have trouble getting enough vitamin D through food, your doctor may suggest supplements.



Bone to pick

Many fruits, such as kiwifruit, strawberries, blueberries, cherries and apricots, are also high in bone-building phosphorus.

HEALING PICKS

- **PROTEINS** You can incorporate both plant and animal proteins. Eat for Health recommends women get an intake of 46g of protein a day, or about 0.75g per kilogram of bodyweight per day. Legumes and soy-based foods, such as tempeh and tofu, are top plant-based choices, while fish and poultry are smart lean proteins.
- **FOODS THAT COMBINE CALCIUM AND VITAMIN D** These rely on each other to confer benefits, so a pro hack is to eat foods with both. Go for fortified dairy and plant-based milk, yoghurt or cereal; canned fish such as salmon; and eggs.
- **VITAMIN K- AND NITRATE-RICH PICKS** "New research suggests we should focus on vitamin K and nitrate for bone and muscle health," says Dawn. Vitamin K, in leafy greens and cruciferous vegies (like broccoli), may increase bone density and reduce fracture risk. Nitrate, present in beetroot and leafy greens, may boost oxygen and blood flow to muscles. ►

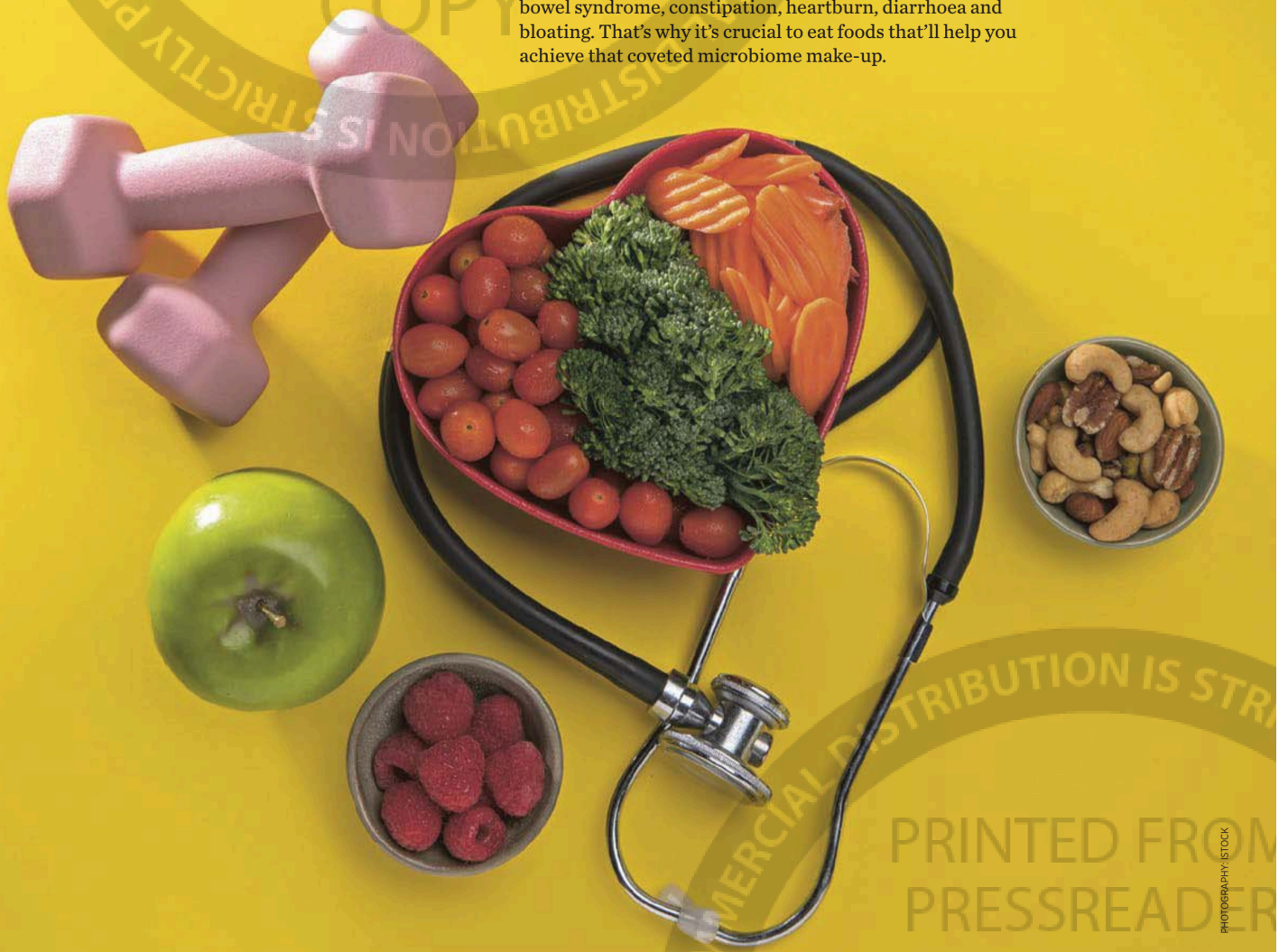
Balance your gut

A healthy gut sets the stage for optimal overall health. That's because many of our body systems are linked in some way to our gut microbiome. "A healthy gut lining makes it much easier for essential nutrients to be absorbed so your body can put them to use," explains dietitian Valerie Agyeman. If you think it's pretty cool that 70 per cent of your immune system lives in your gut, you may be interested to learn about the gut-brain axis, which is basically a health highway that connects the two such that maintaining a balance of good and bad gut bacteria can positively influence cognitive and mental health, Valerie says. The gut plays a role in regulating hormones that impact menstrual cycles and menopause, too.

On the flip side, when the gut-bug mix isn't balanced, harmful bacteria can take over, making it harder to keep inflammation in check, affecting things such as immunity and possibly leading to gastrointestinal issues such as irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, heartburn, diarrhoea and bloating. That's why it's crucial to eat foods that'll help you achieve that coveted microbiome make-up.

Fast fact

Your gut is the most complex neural network outside of the brain, with more than 500 million neurons connected to your brain through nerves in your nervous system.



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HEALING PICKS

- **PROBIOTIC FOODS** To populate the gut with good bacteria, go for yoghurt, kefir and fermented items such as kimchi and kombucha. Not all yoghurts contain probiotics, so check the label. Some might say something like 'live and active cultures', while others list specific probiotic strains the product contains, commonly S. thermophilus and L. bulgaricus.
- **PREBIOTIC FOODS** Featuring indigestible fibres, these picks are food for beneficial gut bacteria. You'll find them in foods such as garlic, onions, bananas, asparagus and honey.
- **FIBRE-RICH PICKS** This nutrient is essential for regular bowel movements and to bulk up stool so it can travel efficiently through the digestive tract, says Valerie. Fresh fruit and veg, nuts and seeds, legumes and wholegrains are all solid sources of fibre.

ALL-STAR ANTIOXIDANTS

These biological bodyguards help protect your body from free radicals – harmful molecules that damage cells, bringing on inflammation, and may lead to disease, says Valerie. Plant foods provide a vast array of good guys, but these standouts below are especially deserving of the spotlight.

Flavonoids

They lower inflammation, promote heart health and reduce chronic disease risk. "Anthocyanins in red, purple and blue foods, quercetin in onions and purple cabbage, isoflavones in soy foods, and catechins in green tea are great to include in your diet," says nutritionist Sherene Chou.

Carotenoids

Beta-carotene is found in orange and yellow foods and leafy green produce, and it supports skin, vision and immune health, says Dawn. Lycopene, found in red and pink produce, may support heart health and help protect against certain cancers. Lutein and zeaxanthin also fall into this category and may reduce the progression of age-related macular degeneration. Try to pair these picks with a fat, such as olive oil, for optimal absorption, Sherene adds.

Vitamin C

Studies show that this powerful antioxidant not only helps protect cells against the effects of free radicals, but can also help support and regenerate other antioxidants in the body, says Sherene. Citrus, cruciferous vegies and capsicums are all high in it.

Selenium

This is a must-have when it comes to a strong immune system, and research suggests this essential mineral may help reduce the risk of breast, lung and prostate cancers, says Sherene. In fact, a single Brazil nut can deliver more than 100 per cent of your daily needs.

The five Fs of gut health

Improve your gut with this cheat sheet from dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner.

1 **Chew food FULLY.** Digestion begins in the mouth. Chewing food completely makes it easier to digest, plus you get more nutrients.

2 **Focus on FIBRE.** The goal should be 30 grams each day to help strengthen the gut and provide fuel for good bacteria.

3 **FLUIDS must flow.** When you consume more fibre, it's important to drink more liquids; they work together to keep your digestive tract clean and strong.

4 **Fortify FRIENDLY BACTERIA.** Research suggests that having six or more daily servings of fermented foods, such as kefir, kimchi and kombucha, can drastically improve gut health. If that doesn't feel possible (at least not right away), starting with one serve a day is a step in the right direction.

5 **FITNESS is key.** Science says that regular exercise enhances your gut microbiome. Research has shown that 30 to 90 minutes of moderate- to high-intensity physical activity three times a week results in significant and positive gut-bacteria changes. P

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