- Foods / Nutrition



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HEAL YOUR body with FOOD

THE PATH TO GOOD HEALTH AND LONG LIFE STARTS IN THE KITCHEN.

BY ALYSSA JUNG

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ou 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 flourish, and so will you—but if you fill it with junk, your internal systems will falter, and your health (and your body!) 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 William Li, M.D., a physician and the author of *Eat to Beat Disease: The New Science of How Your Body Can Heal Itself*. "True health care 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.

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 Valerie Agyeman, R.D., a dietitian and the host of women's health podcast *Flourish Heights*. If you think it's pretty cool that 70% 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, Agyeman 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 like immunity, and possibly leading to gastrointestinal issues

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such as irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, heartburn, diarrhea, and bloating. That's why it's crucial to eat foods that will help you achieve that coveted microbiome makeup.

HEALING PICKS

PROBIOTIC FOODS: These populate the gut with good bacteria; go for yogurt, kefir, and fermented items like kimchi and kombucha. Not all yogurts contain probiotics, so check the label—some have the "Live & Active Cultures" (LAC) seal to verify the probiotic content, while others list specific probiotic strains the product contains, commonly S. thermophilus and L. bulgaricus.

PREBIOTIC FOODS: Featuring indigestible fibers, these picks are food for beneficial gut bacteria; find them in garlic, onions, bananas, asparagus, and honey.

FOODS WITH FIBER: This nutrient is essential for regular bowel movements and to bulk up stool so it can travel efficiently through the digestive tract, says Agyeman. Produce, nuts and seeds, legumes, and whole grains are solid sources of fiber.

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Tame Inflammation

Fighting chronic inflammation is the wellness world's latest obsession—and unlike with some of the wackier trends (notice the side-eye, "internal shower" folks), there is a lot to this one. Inflammation is the body's natural defense system that's deployed here and there to help us heal from injury or illness, but it becomes 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 like heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, says Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D.N., author of *The Flexitarian Diet*. "The good news is that eating a varied, nutrient-rich diet can help support the body's natural ability to regulate inflammation," Blatner adds.

HEALING PICKS

COLORFUL FRUITS AND VEGGIES: Bright foods like berries, apples, cabbage, carrots, broccoli, beets, and bell peppers are rich in antioxidants and other anti-inflammatory compounds.

FIBER-FILLED FOODS: A healthy gut helps regulate inflammation, so foods high in fiber such as beans, lentils, and whole grains 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-3's are among them) and monounsaturated fats help decrease inflammation, Blatner 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 suggests that magnesium can act like an antioxidant to fight inflammation," says Blatner. Spinach, pumpkin seeds, tuna, brown rice, black beans, almonds, avocados, bananas, and dark chocolate are all great sources of this mineral.

HERBS AND SPICES: These seasonings make food taste good and contribute anti-inflammatory power.

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 Laura Iu, C.D.N., a registered dietitian in New York City.

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

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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 gotten a bad rap for being 'unhealthy,' but enjoying comfort food from time to time is important for everyone," says Judy Ho, Ph.D., a neuropsychologist and the author of *The New Rules of Attachment*.

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

HEALING PICKS

SALMON: It delivers healthy fats and vitamin D, two essentials for managing stress, anxiety, and depression. Low levels of the "sunshine vitamin" have been associated with increased risk of depression and anxiety, lu says, and fat impacts how mood-related chemicals and hormones function.

OATS: Whole grains such as oats are complex carbs, and they 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 Ho.

NUTS AND SEEDS: These are a source of omega-3's, which help keep stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline under control, explains Ho. Olive oil and avocado are also rich in omega-3's.

The 5 F's of GUT HEALTH

Improve your gut health by using this cheat sheet from Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D.N.

1 CHEW FOOD FULLY. Digestion begins in the mouth. Chewing our food completely makes it easier to digest so we're able to get more nutrients from it.

2 FOCUS ON FIBER. The goal: 30 g each day to help strengthen the gut and provide fuel for good bacteria.

3 FLUIDS MUST FLOW. When you consume more fiber, 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 servings of fermented foods daily can drastically improve gut health; if that doesn't feel possible (at least not right away), starting with one daily serving is a step in the right direction.

5 FITNESS IS KEY. Science says exercise equals a healthier gut; 30 to 90 minutes thrice weekly resulted in significant consistent and positive gut-bacteria changes.

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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 Ho.

DAIRY: Milk, cheese, and yogurt could contribute to reducing and preventing depressive symptoms. "A recent large study found that as calcium intake increased, symptoms of depression decreased," says Ho. "Vitamin D may also help improve mood by elevating serotonin levels in the brain."



OLIVER BURSTON.

Shore Up Your Skeleton

Bone density and muscle mass naturally decline as we age, which can lead to conditions like 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. More muscle is associated with better immunity and healthy cholesterol, triglyceride, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels," Blatner says.

So 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 Moore, R.D.N., author of *The Plant Love Kitchen*.

"Minerals like calcium and phosphorus are the building blocks of bone, and vitamin D is necessary for calcium absorption," Moore explains.

All-Star ANTIOXIDANTS

These biological bodyguards help protect us from free radicals—harmful molecules that damage cells and may lead to disease, says Valerie Agyeman, R.D. Plant foods provide a huge array of good guys, but these standouts 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 Sherene Chou, R.D.N., cofounder of food andplanet.org.
- **CAROTENOIDS:** Beta-carotene is found in orange and yellow foods and leafy green produce, and it supports skin, vision, and immune health, says Blatner. Lycopene, found in red and pink produce, may support heart health and help protect against certain cancers such as prostate cancer. 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, like olive oil, for optimal absorption, Chou adds.
- **VITAMIN C:** Studies show that it can help support and regenerate other antioxidants in the body, says Chou. Citrus, cruciferous veggies, and bell peppers are high in it.
- **SELENIUM:** This is a must-have when it comes to a strong immune system, and research suggests that it may help reduce the risk of breast, lung, and prostate cancers, says Chou. A single Brazil nut can deliver 100% of your daily needs.

"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.

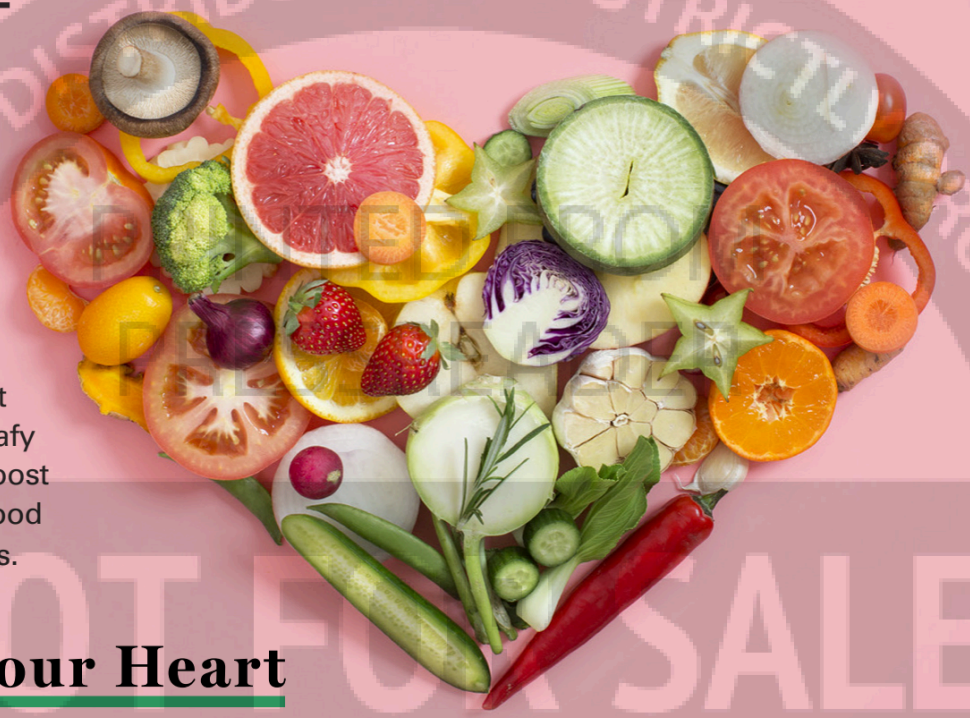
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PROTEINS: You can incorporate both plant and animal proteins, aiming for 0.6 g of protein per pound of body weight per day, Blatner says. Legumes and soy-based foods like tempeh and tofu are great plant-based choices, while fish and poultry are smart 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, yogurt, 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 Blatner. Vitamin K, in

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leafy greens and cruciferous veggies, may increase bone density and reduce fracture risk. Nitrate, present in beets and leafy greens, may boost oxygen and blood flow to muscles.

Help Your Heart

There's no overstating the link between nutrition and heart health. The right foods fuel your ticker by supporting functions like heart rhythm and desirable things like stable blood sugar, healthy cholesterol levels, and blood pressure control, 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 fiber," 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 (whole grains, lots of produce, lean protein like fish, and healthy fats such as from olive oil, legumes, and nuts) provides a heart-healthy mix, but the foods below are über 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 Moore.

BEANS: Plant sterols and soluble fiber in legumes help keep cholesterol in check, Moore says, and magnesium aids in regulating heartbeat and warding off diabetes, a heart disease risk factor.

OLIVE OIL: This cooking staple, 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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