8 Mood-Boosting Foods to help you 'Beat the Winter Blues'

If you are like most people, the shorter daylight hours and dreary weather of winter can sometimes get you down. Less sunlight and fewer opportunities for outdoor exercise can combine to make you feel sluggish. **But did you know you can improve the way you feel by eating certain natural foods?**

By eating foods that are high in **vitamins B, C and D and rich in magnesium, iron, folate and omega-3 fatty acids,** you can increase both your energy levels, and, in many cases, improve your mood.

Here is a list of the top foods to eat for their mood-elevating boost:

1. Fish

These fish are rich in omega-3 fatty acids that improve the function of the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that processes feelings of pleasure and satisfaction.

Omega-3 fatty acids work to increase the brain's production of serotonin and dopamine, the neurotransmitters directly linked to our moods. In addition, salmon is loaded with vitamin D, which our bodies may be lacking with less exposure to sunlight during the winter.

2. Fresh Fruits

Citrus fruits can be like eating liquid sunshine. The rich amounts of vitamin C in oranges, grapefruits, lemons and limes can help fight fatigue and depression.

Cherries and dark berries are also great mood enhancers. Loaded with antioxidants, berries are rich in folate (also known as B9 or folic acid), which helps the brain produce serotonin and dopamine. These neurotransmitters help regulate the body's sleep-wake cycle.

3. Leafy green vegetables

Popeye was right about spinach! Leafy green veggies, such as spinach, collard greens, kale and chard, are high in potassium, magnesium and calcium, which help regulate stress hormones and your sleep cycle.

Leafy greens are a good source of folate, which can reduce your risk of heart disease and memory loss.

4. Mushrooms

Eating a serving of mushrooms is the equivalent to taking a daily vitamin D supplement.

Mushrooms also contain two B vitamins, niacin and riboflavin, which can help improve your mood.

5. Nuts

Many of us are low in our consumption of magnesium, and, as a result, can feel fatigued and experience other mood-altering effects, such as muscle tension, an irregular heartbeat, insomnia and restless leg syndrome.

Try snacking on nuts or adding them to your salads to get enough of this important mineral. Nuts, such as pecans, walnuts and almonds, also contain the amino acid tryptophan, a neurotransmitter that can improve depression.

6. Dark chocolate

Here's a mood-boosting food that is fun to eat! Dark chocolate stimulates the production of the chemical serotonin, which acts as a natural anti-depressant, and of endorphins. Moderation is the key.

A Swiss study found that eating just an ounce of dark chocolate daily for two weeks reduced stress hormone levels in people with high anxiety.

7. Garlic

If you love Italian food, chances are you love garlic. Did you know garlic is good for your mood? When you consume garlic, your body produces more of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine, which helps reduce stress.

Garlic also relaxes the body's blood vessels and can reduce blood pressure.

8. Bananas

It's portable and easy to eat, and it is great for you. It's the banana.

When you eat a banana, you get a healthy combination of potassium; vitamins A, C and B6; fiber; tryptophan; potassium; phosphorous; iron; protein and carbohydrates. Plus, you get a quick energy boost from both the fructose and the fiber.

The great thing about many of these natural energy-boosting foods is that you can keep them handy in your desk drawer or your car for a quick snack when you need it. So ditch the energy drinks and so-called "power" bars and reach for real food for natural mood lightener this winter.