

## Mood Boosting Food

We have all had those Bridget Jones moments, where we are sat weeping on a sofa singing “All by myself” with a huge spoon and tub of chocolate ice cream. But is ice cream truly the panacea of good mood food, or should we be looking at other, possibly healthier foods to help manage those low moods? With mental health problems effecting 1 in 4 people in the UK each year, and waiting lists for therapy seemingly endless, it is so important to do everything you can to self-help. That can come in many form of exercise, meditation, mindfulness, sleep, socialising and food. So to help you on your journey to better mental health, here are my top mood boosting foods.

### Fish

It was found that the rates of depression were lower in high fish eating countries, which led to research into what component of fish this could be attributed to. Evidence suggests that it is the Omega 3 fatty acids in fish that have the most potential mood benefits.

Omega-3s are integral parts of the membranes that surround each cell in your body and also play an important role in energy storage. There are 3 forms of omega 3 fatty acids, Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and alpha-Linoleic acid (ALA). ALA is what we call an “essential” fatty acid, which means that it must be consumed through our diet and cannot be made by our body. We can make a small amount of EPA and DHA from ALA, but only a limited amount, so it’s still important to get it from our diets too. ALA is found mainly in plant oils and DHA and EPA are found mainly in seafood. Fish with higher omega 3 contents are the oily fish like mackerel, salmon, sardines and herring.

My favourite fish dish, is to marinade salmon in sauce made from a mixture of miso paste, lime juice, soy sauce, sesame seeds, ginger, garlic and chilli (loosen up the sauce with a little water, or if you are feeling up for a slightly sweet and sour taste add a bit of honey too), and pan fry it alongside some crispy Asian vegetables. I’m salivating already and its only 10am!

### Nuts

Nuts are packed full of goodness, and a particular nut that features highly on my daily munch list is walnuts. Nuts are helpful mood boosters for a number of reasons including:

1. Omega 3- like fish they are high in Omega 3s but a different form, ALA. Studies have found similar links to that of the other omega 3 fatty acids whereby, ALA stores were negatively correlated with depression.
2. Selenium- low levels of selenium have been associated with low mood in a number of studies. Selenium plays a role in our antioxidant defence system. When our body’s defence system is exceeded, it causes “oxidative stress”, which is thought to play a role in the development of many conditions, of which some may link to mental health. In addition, selenium deficiency can interfere with the normal conversion of the ALA Omega 3 fatty acid into the other forms EPA and DHA, thus also affecting mood.

The best thing about nuts is that you can sprinkle them on top of nearly everything! Porridge, ice cream, banana loaf, or my all-time favourite snack of dates stuffed with walnuts.

### Turkey

Plenty of protein-rich foods contain tryptophan which is an essential amino acid that is required to make serotonin. Serotonin is often termed the “happiness hormone”, and is a neurotransmitter in our brain, an imbalance of which many researchers believe influence moods in a way that leads to depression. So a diet deficient in tryptophan may reduce serotonin production in the brain and therefore trigger mental health issues like depression and anxiety. The journey of tryptophan from the stomach to brain can be restricted by other competing amino acids in foods, so it is considered best to consume these high tryptophan containing foods with carbohydrates rather than other proteins.

People often lean towards chicken and turkey for healthy sources of tryptophan, but there are also vegan options with pumpkin and squash seeds being high on the list. But in my mind little can compete with a Sunday roast, combining that protein with all the perfect carbohydrate heavy accompaniments- “hello roasties”!

### Lentils

Lentils seem like a very modest food, but they have significant health benefits, and may improve mood through the following pathways:

1. Zinc- Legumes like chickpeas, lentils and beans all contain substantial amounts of zinc. Several studies have shown that zinc levels are lower in patients with depression, and that supplementation may reduce the risk of depression. Furthermore, we know that zinc supplementation may also increase omega-3 in turn also improving mood. It is worth mentioning that the zinc isn't as well absorbed from legumes as it is from meat so if you're more of a carnivore other foods that contain a high zinc levels are red meat and shellfish.
2. Folic acid- research has found low levels of folic acid among patients with depression and that supplementation may have a beneficial effect in depression. It is of further interest as a deficiency in folic acid has been found in animal to result in reduced omega 3, and that its supplementation increases omega-3 status.
3. Fibre - Lentils are a great source of protein and fibre, both of which help to maintain stable and consistent, more evenly balanced blood sugar levels through the day to help your mood also stay stabilised. But in addition to this, fibre is considered a prebiotic. That is to say that the microorganisms of our gut feed on that fibre, and it is these bugs that help convert tryptophan into serotonin. Of course there are many other foods that contain lots of fibre, so enjoy your wholegrain rice, bowl of pasta or sandwich, knowing that you are aiding digestion, and happiness!

Lentils can taste a bit plain, so I like to incorporate it in my diet through a spicy dahl, adding plenty of turmeric, garam masala, garlic and curry leaves to give it that added zing.

### Chocolate

I could hardly end this article without a nod to our beloved cocoa plant. Yes, a lot of chocolate is not ideal especially with its sugar content, but a lovely little square of that melt in the mouth dark

chocolate yumminess can trigger the brain to release endorphins giving you that warm and fuzzy feeling, akin to feeling in love! There are also other stimulants within cocoa, theobromine and phenylethylamine, which are also thought to influence your levels of serotonin.

Whilst I would love to give you the food formula for good mental health, it is rarely a one size fits all. But you will notice that the foods mentioned are all considered part of a healthy diet. So providing you a eating a well-balanced plate of food, the likelihood is that you are already doing what you can to aid your mental health. Remember that if your mental health ever gets too much for you, please speak to your doctor.