

Energy Foods: A Diet to Boost Your Mood & Energy Level

Presented by GISI's Wellness
Committee

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Can Food Boost Energy and Mood?

It's an intriguing possibility. While it's too soon to say, "an apple a day keeps the doldrums away," researchers are studying the links between what we eat and how we feel. There is evidence that changing your diet can alter your metabolism and brain chemistry, ultimately affecting your energy level and mood.



Getting Started

Foods can boost energy in three ways: by providing sufficient calories, by delivering stimulants like caffeine, and by pushing the metabolism to burn fuel more efficiently. As for mood, the best foods are those that stabilize blood sugar and trigger feel-good brain chemicals, such as serotonin. Keep reading to learn which foods and drinks can do the job.



Smart Carbs

Carbs may be the foe of fad diets, but they're vital for boosting energy and mood. They are the body's preferred source of fuel, plus they raise serotonin levels. The key is to avoid sweets, which cause blood sugar to spike and plummet, leading to fatigue and moodiness. Instead, turn to whole grains like whole-wheat bread, brown rice, and cereal. The body absorbs whole grains more slowly, keeping blood sugar and energy levels stable.



Almonds, Hazelnuts & Cashews

These nuts are not only rich in protein, but they also contain magnesium, a mineral that plays a vital role in converting sugar into energy. Research suggests magnesium deficiency can drain your energy. Magnesium is also found in whole grains, particularly bran cereals, and in some types of fish, including halibut.



Brazil Nuts

Add Brazil nuts to the mix for a helpful dose of selenium, which may be a natural mood booster. Studies have reported a link between low selenium and poorer moods. This mineral also occurs in smaller amounts in meats, seafood, beans, and whole grains.



Lean Meats

Lean pork, lean beef, skinless chicken, and turkey are healthy sources of protein, including the amino acid tyrosine. Tyrosine boosts levels of dopamine and norepinephrine, brain chemicals that can help you feel more alert and focused. Meats also contain vitamin B12, which may combat insomnia and depression.



Salmon

Fatty fish, such as salmon, is rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Studies suggest this substance may protect against depression. While the extent of the link is uncertain, omega-3 fatty acids offer a wide range of other benefits, including heart health. Besides fish, sources of omega-3 include nuts and leafy, dark green vegetables.



Leafy Greens

Another nutrient that may reduce the risk of depression is folate. Like omega-3 fatty acids, folate is found in leafy green vegetables, including spinach and romaine lettuce. Legumes, nuts, and citrus fruits are also good sources of folate.



Fiber

Fiber is an energy stabilizer. It slows digestion, providing a more steady supply of energy throughout the day. Boost your fiber intake by eating beans, whole fruits, vegetables, whole-grain breads, and whole-grain cereals.



Water

Dehydration and fatigue go hand-in-hand. Some studies suggest even mild dehydration can slow the metabolism and sap your energy. The solution is simple – drink plenty of water or other unsweetened beverages at regular intervals.



Fresh Produce

Another way to stay hydrated and energized is to eat fluid-filled foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Skip dry packaged snacks like pretzels in favor of apple wedges or celery. Other hydrating foods include oatmeal and pasta, which swell up with water when cooked.



Coffee

Coffee may be one of the world's most popular pick-me-ups, and evidence suggests it works – at least in the short-term. Caffeine steps up the body's metabolism, temporarily improving mental focus and energy. Frequent mini-servings will keep you alert and focused longer than a single large dose. Just beware of drinking so much coffee that you can't sleep at night. Lack of sleep is an obvious energy-buster.



Tea

An alternative source of caffeine is, of course, tea. Research suggests that tea's combination of caffeine and the amino acid L-theanine can improve alertness, reaction time, and memory. Black tea has also been shown to combat the effects of stress.



Dark Chocolate

Chocoholics, you probably knew this already – a few squares of dark chocolate can boost both energy and mood. Caffeine is at work again, along with another stimulant called theobromine.



Breakfast

For anyone hoping to boost energy and mood, skipping breakfast is not an option. Studies show that people who eat breakfast every morning enjoy more energy and a better mood throughout the day. The best breakfasts deliver plenty of fiber and nutrients through whole-grain carbs, good fats, and some type of lean protein.



Frequent Meals

Another strategy for stabilizing blood sugar, energy, and mood: Eat small meals and snacks every three to four hours, rather than a few large meals. Energy-sustaining snacks include peanut butter on whole-grain crackers, half a turkey sandwich with salad, or whole-grain cereal with milk.



Energy Supplements

Energy supplements are often touted as an alternative to coffee or other stimulants. Many of these supplements actually contain caffeine or similar chemical substances. Examples include kola nut, yerba mate, green tea extract, and guarana. These supplements may give you a temporary boost, but experts say the effect is probably not much different than drinking ordinary coffee.



Energy Drinks & Gels

Most energy drinks and gels infuse the body with simple carbohydrates – in other words, sugar, which the body can quickly convert into energy. This is a convenient way for high-intensity athletes to keep going, but the benefits for the rest of us are dubious. Energy drinks are usually high on calories and low on nutrients.



Exercise for Energy

Besides altering your diet, exercise is a tried-and-true way to boost energy and mood. Even a single 15-minute walk can be energizing, and the benefits increase with more frequent physical activity. Studies indicate that regular exercise can relieve depression and trigger physiological changes that make more energy available throughout the day.



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