



Anxiety and Nutrition: Foods That Calm and Foods That Trigger



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The relationship between food and mood isn't just about occasional indulgences or comfort eating. There's a deeper connection between our daily diet and how we process emotions, particularly anxiety.

While many factors contribute to our mental well-being, the foods we routinely consume play a more significant role than we might realize. There are foods that help with anxiety, and there are those that don't. Here's everything you need to know about the way food influences our mental well-being.

The Gut-Brain Connection

The [gut-brain axis](#) represents a bidirectional communication pathway between our digestive tract and the brain. Part of this communication system is a vast network of nerves that sends signals in both directions and neurotransmitters, which are chemical messengers responsible for mood regulation.

The health of our gut can influence the production and function of these neurotransmitters, which in turn impact our mood and emotions. For instance, the gut produces about [95% of the body's serotonin](#) (happy hormones). Our gut cannot produce these hormones properly when it's in poor health.

Moreover, the gut houses trillions of bacteria known as the gut microbiota. These microorganisms contribute significantly to our health by aiding digestion, producing essential vitamins, and fighting pathogens. Additionally, they produce a range of neurotransmitters and chemicals that can influence brain function.

The balance of bad versus good bacteria in our gut is delicate. Factors like diet, [stress](#), [lack of sleep](#), infection, and medications can disturb this balance. [Dysbiosis](#), an imbalance in the gut microbiome, may lead to several health issues, from digestive disorders to mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

[Emerging studies](#) suggest we can influence our mental well-being by caring for our gut health through dietary choices, probiotics, and lifestyle changes.

What Foods Help With Anxiety?

The foods we choose to consume can directly influence our emotions and mood. Some foods have properties that promote relaxation and reduce anxiety, while others might have the opposite effect. Thus, if we eat better, we tend to feel better. Here's a list of food items that provide anxiety relief:

1. Whole Grains

[Whole grains](#) like quinoa, brown rice, oats, and barley are packed with slow-releasing carbohydrates. Unlike simple sugars that give a quick energy spike followed by a crash, these carbs release energy slowly, ensuring a consistent fuel supply to the brain.

The steady energy supply helps stabilize blood sugar levels, preventing mood fluctuations triggered by sudden drops in glucose.

2. Fatty Fish

Think salmon, mackerel, and sardines. These fatty fish are rich in [omega-3s](#), which help protect nerve cells from damage. With their anti-inflammatory properties, omega-3 fatty acids combat inflammation that might interfere with neurotransmitter function. Additionally, their high vitamin D content also affects mood regulation.

3. Leafy Greens

Swiss chard, spinach, kale, and other leafy vegetables are high in magnesium. [Magnesium](#) helps in nerve function, potentially aiding anxiety reduction. It protects the brain from stressors that can cause [anxiety and depression](#).

4. Fermented Foods

Yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, and kimchi are some fermented foods rich in [probiotics](#) that support a healthy gut microbiome. A balanced gut can communicate positively with the brain via the gut-brain axis, potentially reducing anxiety-related symptoms.

5. Dark Chocolate

[Dark chocolate](#) may be one of the foods that reduce anxiety fast due to its delicious taste and ability to release serotonin, a mood-lifting neurotransmitter. Moreover, it contains flavonoids and antioxidants that can inhibit stress and improve blood flow to the brain. To avoid sugar spikes and to get the highest amount of chocolate's beneficial properties, choose the variants with high cacao content (85% and up).

6. Nuts & Seeds

Almonds, walnuts, chia seeds, and flaxseeds are nutrition powerhouses. They provide a mix of omega-3 fatty acids, magnesium, and B vitamins—all vital nutrients for brain health and anxiety reduction.

7. Avocados

Avocados are loaded with [B vitamins](#) and monounsaturated fats that support both nerve and brain health. These nutrients play an integral role in keeping anxiety levels in check.

8. Eggs

Egg yolk, in particular, offers choline. The body uses choline to produce acetylcholine, a mood and stress regulation neurotransmitter. The overall protein content in eggs can also help keep blood sugar levels steady, further supporting mood stabilization.

9. Turkey

Turkey is a notable source of [tryptophan](#), an amino acid that assists the body in producing serotonin. Higher serotonin levels can enhance mood, sleep, and overall well-being—factors that ultimately help decrease anxiety levels.

10. Berries

Blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries are antioxidant-rich fruits. Antioxidants fight oxidative stress in the body, preventing inflammation and anxiety.

11. Oysters

These shellfish are exceptionally high in zinc, a mineral essential for the brain and mood regulation. Some [studies](#) show that people with zinc deficiencies have a higher risk of anxiety.

12. Bananas

As a great potassium and vitamin B6 source, bananas can help produce mood-regulating neurotransmitters and keep the nervous system functioning optimally.

13. Herbal Teas

Apart from relaxing foods, you can also try herbal teas like chamomile, green, and lavender. They possess natural compounds that promote relaxation and reduce stress. These teas can also aid sleep, which is crucial for managing anxiety. Chamomile, for instance, contains antioxidants that reduce inflammation and anxiety, while green tea offers L-theanine, an amino acid that promotes relaxation without causing sleepiness.

What Foods Cause Anxiety?

Now that you know the best foods for anxiety relief, knowing which foods can aggravate your symptoms is also important. Below are the foods that trigger anxiety:

1. Caffeine

[Caffeine](#) in coffee, energy drinks, certain teas, and some chocolates is a central nervous system stimulant. While many rely on its energy-boosting properties, it can also increase nervousness, restlessness, and jitters. For some, even a small amount can induce heart palpitations, panic attacks, or insomnia—all closely linked to anxiety.

2. Sugar and High-Glycemic Foods

Sweets, sodas, and other sugar-laden treats cause rapid spikes in blood sugar. What follows, though, is an inevitable crash, which can lead to irritability, mood swings, and fatigue. High-glycemic foods like white bread and pastries can have similar effects. Fluctuating blood sugar levels can exacerbate feelings of anxiety for many.

3. Alcohol

While people consume alcohol to "relax" or "wind down," it has a more complicated relationship with anxiety. In the short term, it might produce feelings of relaxation due to its depressant nature. However, as it metabolizes and leaves the system, it can lead to symptoms of withdrawal, which often mirror those of anxiety—such as increased heart rate, nervousness, and feelings of unease.

Furthermore, alcohol disrupts the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep, which can contribute to fatigue and mood disturbances the following day.

4. Ultra-Processed Foods

Ready-to-eat items on supermarket shelves contain many additives, preservatives, and artificial ingredients. These can include monosodium glutamate (MSG), artificial colorings, and certain flavor enhancers. Such chemicals can affect brain function, potentially leading to mood imbalances and heightened anxiety in sensitive individuals.

5. Certain Artificial Sweeteners

[Aspartame](#), a common sugar substitute in many diet sodas and sugar-free products, has been a topic of debate for years. Some studies suggest a connection between aspartame consumption and neurological effects, including increased anxiety and depressive symptoms.

6. Fried Foods

Heavy, greasy foods can be harder for the body to digest. This slow digestion can lead to imbalances in blood sugar, which can trigger mood issues. The trans fats in fried foods might negatively impact the brain's neurotransmitter function, further contributing to feelings of anxiety.

7. Dairy Products

While not everyone is sensitive to dairy, those with lactose intolerance or sensitivity may experience physical symptoms like bloating, gas, and stomach cramps after consuming dairy products. These physical discomforts can heighten feelings of unease and anxiety in some individuals.

Tips to Optimize Diet for Better Mental Well-Being

Besides consuming the best foods for anxiety relief, you must also optimize your daily diet. Doing so can positively impact your mood, cognitive function, and overall mental health. Here are six tips on how you can better manage your food and drink intake:

1. Stay Hydrated

Even mild dehydration can affect cognitive functions like concentration, alertness, and short-term memory. Staying properly hydrated supports optimal brain function. Aim for the standard recommendation of 8 cups (around 2 liters) daily, though individual needs can vary based on activity level, climate, and other factors.

2. Aim for Balance and Moderation

Remember that no single food can provide all the nutrients we need. It's also worth noting that individual reactions can vary greatly—a major trigger for one person might be a calming food to another. Instead, go for a balanced diet that includes a variety of nutrients from different sources. It ensures you get a mix of essential nutrients and reduces the risk of overconsumption of any single component.

3. Eat a Diverse Diet Rich in Whole, Unprocessed Foods

The best diet for anxiety contains a lot of whole, natural foods and a small amount of ultra-processed foods. Whole foods, like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats, supply the nutrients the body and brain need to function optimally. They provide a broad spectrum of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that decrease inflammation and oxidative stress, which are factors linked to mental health disorders.

4. Monitor Food's Effects

Observe your body and adjust accordingly. Being conscious of how specific foods affect one's mood and anxiety levels is crucial. Maintaining a food and mood diary can be insightful. Note how you feel after consuming certain foods. Do sugary treats make you feel energetic but then cause a crash? Does too

much caffeine make you jittery or anxious? Recognizing these patterns can help you adjust your diet for better mental balance.

5. Plan Ahead

When life gets busy, it's easy to opt for convenience foods, which might not be the most nutritious choice. By planning meals or preparing larger portions to have leftovers, you can ensure that you can access balanced, nutritious meals even during the busiest times.

6. Avoid Large Meals Before Bed

Heavy meals can disrupt sleep by making digestion more labor-intensive. Sleep is crucial for mental health, so eating lighter meals in the evening is advisable.

Don't Let Anxiety Get the Best of You!

As we explore foods to reduce anxiety, one underlying theme remains clear: our well-being depends on a blend of multiple factors, with diet being just one component. Although understanding and adjusting our food choices can help alleviate anxiety, addressing its roots requires professional guidance.

[Peak Wellness Psychiatry](#) gives you a simple and easy way to get expert help. Our online psychiatry services provide the flexibility to consult from the comfort of one's home, ensuring everyone is on the right path to better mental health.

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