

The 10 Best Foods to Reduce Anxiety

Shut down anxious thoughts by grabbing the right foods from your fridge.

By [Anthea Levi](#)

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We all know the saying, "You are what you eat." But recent research makes the case that this adage applies not just to your physical body but your mind as well. The foods you put on your plate really can make a real difference when it comes to mental health issues, including [anxiety](#) disorders—the [top cause](#) of mental illnesses in the United States.

How does food help with anxiety? Anxiety is caused in part by an imbalance of neurotransmitters, explains [Ali Miller](#), RD, an integrative dietitian and author of *The Anti-Anxiety Diet*. Neurotransmitters are chemical messengers believed to play a role in mood regulation. A diet that features nutrients from whole food ingredients helps create neurotransmitter balance by improving the gut [microbiome](#). "By removing refined carbohydrates and gut irritants, you can provide support for healthy gut bacteria production," says Miller.

When it comes to dialing down anxiety, what you don't eat is just as important as what you do, says Nathalie Rhone, RDN, New York City-based nutritionist and founder of [Nutrition by Nathalie](#). "Foods that are processed, high in sugar and refined carbohydrates, fried, or loaded with additives can all heighten anxiety since they are inflammatory in your system, which can eventually affect your brain."

Everyday eats like oranges, leafy greens, and avocado won't cure anxiety, but it can help lower the severity of symptoms. And while a turkey sandwich won't ban racing thoughts from your head forever, experts say adding this anxiety-fighting lean poultry to your diet may soothe some anxiety symptoms. Here, 10 foods to add to your meal prep routine now.

Turkey

We've all been warned that tryptophan, an amino acid in turkey, can send us into a food coma after a big Thanksgiving meal. But tryptophan's relaxation effect can also ease anxiety. "Tryptophan helps the body produce serotonin, the happy, calming

neurotransmitter that helps regulate sleep,” says Rhone. “Tryptophan is usually highest in protein foods like turkey, but can also be found in nuts, seeds, and beans.”

Salmon

This versatile and satiating fish is loaded with omega-3 fatty acids, which are essential for brain health and a well-functioning nervous system, says [Cynthia Sass](#), RD, *Health's* contributing nutrition editor. “Getting enough of these important anti-inflammatory fats has been shown to elevate mood and decrease the risk of [depression](#),” she says. Opt for wild salmon over farmed varieties.

Dark chocolate

Nutritionists sing the praises of dark chocolate because it has more healthy antioxidants than other kinds. “The antioxidants in dark chocolate trigger the walls of blood vessels to relax, which boosts circulation and lowers blood pressure,” Sass tells *Health*. “Research has also shown that [stressed](#) people who ate 1.5 ounces of dark chocolate daily for two weeks experienced a reduction in stress hormones.” Go ahead, make a small chunk of 70% (or higher) dark chocolate your new 3 p.m. pick-me-up.

Asparagus

In 2013, the Chinese government proclaimed that [asparagus](#) extract is a natural functional (aka, medicinal) food for its ability to reduce stress and promote relaxation. Yes, really. One possible reason for asparagus' soothing effect: high levels of the B vitamin folate, a shortage of which has been linked to depression.

“Just one cup of cooked asparagus provides nearly 70% of the daily recommended intake of folate,” says Sass. Bonus points go to asparagus for being a prebiotic food, meaning it serves as a food source for probiotics, which are also thought to have positive effects on mood.

Sauerkraut

Speaking of probiotics, fermented products such as sauerkraut are considered probiotic foods, and consuming more of them on a regular basis appears to have a mood-boosting effect. In fact, a [study](#) published in the journal *Psychiatry Research* found that a diet high in sauerkraut, kefir, pickles, and other fermented eats was associated with fewer social anxiety symptoms in young adults. “Our gut is our

second brain,” explains Rhone. “If your gut is out of balance, your brain is also out of balance.”

Show your microbiome some TLC by adding probiotic-rich foods to your plate, like sauerkraut and kimchi, both of which are made from fermented veggies like cabbage and radishes.

Citrus fruits

“Our adrenal glands are the most concentrated storage tissue for vitamin C and they use the nutrient in the regulation of cortisol,” says Miller. That might explain why [studies](#) show that vitamin C supplementation has been linked to reduced anxiety levels. Of course, it’s always better to get nutrients from whole food sources—so add lemons or limes to your tea and brighten yogurt bowls or salads with in-season oranges and grapefruits this winter.

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Broccoli

Dark green veggies like broccoli contain magnesium, “a calming mineral that can help with relaxation, as well as with keeping things moving through your digestive system,” notes Rhone. To get your daily dose of the recommended 400 mg of magnesium, steam some broccoli as a side dish, or work this cruciferous powerhouse into omelets, soups, and casseroles. Other top sources of magnesium include almonds, sunflower seeds, and sesame seeds.

Avocado

Avocados are packed with monounsaturated fats and antioxidants that help optimize circulation, says Sass, which contributes to better blood flow to the epicenter of your anxious thoughts: your brain. The fruits also supply 20 different vitamins and minerals, including key nutrients tied to mood, like folate, B6, and potassium, she adds. Consider this the green light to keep your avo toast obsession alive.

Oats

Like leafy greens, oats contain high levels of soothing minerals like magnesium. According to Sass, just a half-cup of dry oats provides a third of the recommended

daily target for [magnesium](#). “They also provide steady, even energy and are packed with antioxidants and nutrients involved in mood regulation.”

Chamomile tea

As healthy as a cup of [coffee](#) can be, your daily latte habit isn’t likely to help your anxiety. Chamomile tea, on the other hand, might. According to a [report](#) from Harvard Medical School, chamomile tea has been shown to be an effective alternative treatment for anxiety. Cozy up with a cup before bed to calm your system and set yourself up for a better night's sleep.

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