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# TOP 25 FOODS FOR WOMEN

Whether you want to prevent PMS, protect yourself from cancer or boost your energy levels, eating the right superfoods can transform your wellbeing. Nutritionist Christine Bailey looks at what you should be buying

Illustration: Carolyn

## 1. Kale

It isn't just dairy products that boost your bones. This dark green leafy vegetable is one of the richest vegetable sources of calcium, which is essential for good bone health. Incredibly nutrient dense, it also provides plenty of vitamins A and C and potassium, folic acid and iron for energy production, plus eye-ight-promoting and cancer-fighting lutein and zeaxanthin.



## 2. Asparagus

Are you pregnant or planning to have a baby soon? Asparagus is rich in folate, which is essential for ensuring proper neural tube development of the foetus, preventing spine defects, as well as being important for heart health. Asparagus is also rich in vitamins, including B1, B2, B3 and B6, which play a

central role in keeping your brain and nervous system healthy and combating fatigue and stress.

## 3. Berries

Packed with antioxidants, berries – and blueberries in particular – are the perfect anti-aging snack. Rich in phytochemicals, such as phenolic acids and anthocyanins, they're one of the best foods for fighting free-radical cell damage. Research suggests blueberries can also help to fight wrinkles and certain compounds that protect against urinary tract infections. Have half a cup a day and use frozen berries when not in season.

## 4. Olives and olive oil

Keep your skin youthful and your joints flexible with this oil. One of the best sources

of monounsaturated fats, olives are also rich in vitamin E and antioxidants, which protect cells from damage that can contribute to ageing. Include a tablespoon a day in your diet to lower your risk of heart disease and protect against certain cancers.

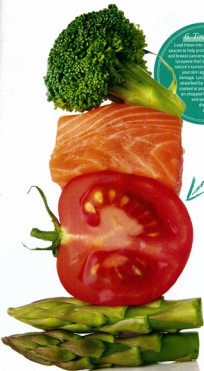
## 5. Oats

If you have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), eat porridge every morning. Rich in soluble and insoluble fibre, oats can help to soothe an irritated gut and regulate bowel movements. They are also an excellent way to start your day, as a good source of energy-boosting and immune-supporting selenium, phosphorus, magnesium and vitamin B1. Oats are packed with slow-release carbohydrates, helping you feel fuller for longer and making them useful if you're trying to lose weight.



### Go Tomatoes

Load these into salads and pasta sauces to help protect against cervical and breast cancers. It's the antioxidant lycopene that's key, and it's also nature's sunscreen, helping protect your skin against free-radical damage. Lycopene is more easily absorbed by your body when it's cooked or processed, so stock up on chopped tomatoes and puree, and eat a tomato-based dish three to four days a week.



## 7. Low-fat yoghurt

Do you suffer from throat or other yeast infections? Eating live natural yoghurt every day will help to prevent them by restoring the friendly bacteria (lactobacilli) in your body. Probiotic bacteria have also been shown to be critical for supporting immune health – a bonus during the autumn and winter months. Yoghurt is rich in calcium too, making it great for bone health. If you're trying to lose weight, especially around the stomach, eating more calcium-rich foods, especially low-fat dairy foods such as yoghurt, has been shown to help.



*Green tea can accelerate loss of body fat around your waist*

muscle and losing weight loss. Fermented soy products such as miso, tempeh and natto are thought to be more easily digested and contain activated isoflavones, but other forms, such as edamame, tofu and soy yoghurts, are also beneficial.

## 12. Salmon

Wild Alaskan salmon is a must-eat food for women. It's packed with heart-friendly omega-3 fatty acids, including DHA and EPA, which also fight depression, lower inflammation and protect against cancers and Alzheimer's disease. Salmon is a top-performance food, as it's a great source of protein and energy-boosting coenzyme Q10. Other good fish choices include sardines and mackerel. Try to eat oily fish two or three times a week.



## 8. Cranberries

Every woman's friend, these berries are known for their ability to prevent urinary tract infections, thanks to a substance that prevents bacteria from attaching to the walls of the urinary tract. Cranberry juice has also been shown to inhibit the bacteria associated with peptic ulcers, *Helicobacter pylori*, and is high in vitamin C and antioxidants. Reach for fresh or frozen cranberries in a little orange juice and water to make a compote, or add dried berries to a salad or bowl of porridge.

## 9. Green tea

Trying to lose weight? Recent research in the *Journal of Nutrition* suggests drinking four to five cups of green tea every day, combined with exercise, can accelerate loss of body fat around your waist. Green tea is rich in antioxidants that have been shown to raise the metabolic rate, making it easier to burn fat. It also contains theanine, a calming neurotransmitter that helps to beat stress.

## 10. Cinnamon

If you're prone to dips in energy or sugar cravings, add this spice to your morning latte. Cinnamon helps to improve the transport of glucose to your body's cells rather than encouraging it to be stored as fat. It's also thermogenic, meaning it helps to burn off fat. Use a teaspoon of ground cinnamon a day sprinkled over porridge or milky drinks.



## 11. Soya

From tofu to soya milk, soya products are rich in phytoestrogens known as isoflavones, naturally occurring substances that modulate female hormone levels to ease perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms. Rich in protein, soya is also useful for building

## 13. Sea vegetables

Love sushi? Then you'll love the fact that sea vegetables – a group of foods that includes edible seaweeds such as kaimbu, wakame and nori – are packed with an array of minerals that boost female health. They're a great source of magnesium and calcium, which help to relieve stress and promote relaxation, as well as supporting bone health. They're also rich in iodine, which supports thyroid function; a slightly underactive thyroid is common in women and can often lead to low mood, lethargy and difficulty losing weight. Sea vegetables can be bought from most health food shops. Add them to soups and stews or cook them and use raw in salads.

## 14. Dark chocolate

This treat is packed with heart-protective antioxidants, as well as bone-supporting minerals magnesium, manganese, copper, zinc and phosphorus. Chocolate also contains phenylethylamine, which triggers the release of endorphins to boost your mood and motivation. Research in the *Journal of Nutrition* also suggests eating chocolate before a workout raises antioxidant levels and helps to combat exercise-induced stress. Eat a few squares a day to reap the benefits.



## 15. Maca

A root vegetable native to the Andes, maca is a fantastic superfood for women. Its adaptogen properties help to counter the effects of stress and balance your hormones. It's also incredibly nutrient-dense, containing plenty of amino acids, magnesium, phosphorus, calcium and B vitamins. Buy it as a powder and add to drinks, smoothies and puddings.

## 16. Walnuts

Feeling stressed? Munch on a handful of walnuts — studies show that the omega-3 fatty acid alpha-linolenic acid helps your body handle stress more effectively and lower blood pressure. One of the healthiest nuts, walnuts not only provide protein, fibre and omega-3 fats, but are also rich in folate, perfect if you're planning a baby. Omega-3 fats also help to reduce PMS.

## 17. Beans and pulses

If your period is a problem, you should add these budget-friendly superfoods to your diet. Beans and lentils are a good source of iron and folate, which are needed for the production of healthy red blood cells and are particularly important for menstruating women, who are at increased risk of iron deficiency. They're also packed with antioxidants, fibre, protein and slow-release carbohydrates, making them a useful food for sustained energy. As an added bonus, they provide plenty of magnesium, which is an essential mineral for energy production and preventing muscle cramps after exercise.

## 18. Avocado

Yes, avocados are high in fat, but this is the type of fat that can help you get a fat stomach. They're a rich source of healthy monounsaturated fats and, according to a study in the *Journal of Diabetes Care*, eating a small portion of these fats with every meal can disperse fat around your middle. Avocados are also a nutrient-dense food, packed with potassium, magnesium, folate, protein and cholesterol-lowering plant sterols.

## 19. Flaxseed

Adding one to two heaped desertspoons of cold-milled flaxseed to your daily diet is an excellent way to ease PMS and acne. Flaxseeds are a rich source of fibre and lignans, which can help to raise levels of sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG), which helps to carry old hormones such as oestrogen back to the liver, from where it is excreted from the body. It

may be the perfect antioxidant if you're prone to sleepless nights.

## 20. Broccoli

You can lower your risk of breast cancer by piling your plate with this cruciferous vegetable. It's rich in plant compounds such as indoles and isothiocyanates, which have cancer-fighting properties and help to eliminate excess oestrogen from the body, which is linked to some forms of cancer. Broccoli is also a great PMS-fighting food because it contains folate, which boosts mood, and calcium, which helps with cramps, and is diuretic, so helps reduce bloating. It also contains vitamins A and C, and iron. Have two to three servings a week.

## 21. Milk

A glass of semi-skimmed milk may be the solution if you suffer from PMS and acne. It's rich in calcium and vitamin D, which together can help to ease premenstrual symptoms. Research suggests many of us are low in vitamin D, which you also get from exposure to sunlight, and it's linked to low mood, depression and an increased risk of developing cancer. Milk is also a source of tryptophan, which the body converts into the sleep hormone melatonin. A cup of warm milk before bed

## 22. Bananas

If you need a boost, peel a banana. They are packed with nutrients that can soothe and lift your mood, and are a natural source of tryptophan, which the body converts into the mood-boosting neurotransmitter serotonin. Bananas are also rich in carbohydrates, making them ideal for when you crave comfort foods, and they're one of the best sources of vitamin B6, which can help to boost energy levels and ease premenstrual symptoms.

## 23. Turmeric

A popular Asian spice, turmeric contains the anti-inflammatory ingredient curcumin, which may help to ease menstrual cramps, as well as sore muscles after your workout. Curcumin has also been shown to protect against cancer, including melanoma, tumour cells and breast cancer. Add a tablespoon of turmeric to curries, soups and stews. Mixing the spice with black pepper, which contains piperine, has been shown to significantly increase its absorption and hence its anti-inflammatory effects.

## 24. Coconut

This tropical treat is two superfoods in one. Coconut oil or butter is a great energy booster containing medium-chain triglycerides (MCT), readily metabolised for energy by your liver rather than being stored as fat. Being heat stable, it's one of the healthiest cooking oils. Coconut water makes a great post-workout drink, as it provides essential electrolytes potassium, magnesium and calcium, which your body needs to stay hydrated.

## 25. Eggs

To lose fat around your middle, have an omelette for breakfast. Researchers at Louisiana State University found that obese people who ate two eggs for breakfast at least five times a week lost 45 per cent more weight and had more energy than women who had bagels. Best thing? Eggs are packed with protein, making them more satisfying than carbs and can promote lean muscle. Yolk, in particular, are one of the best sources of choline, which reduces the risk of breast cancer. ■

