Mood foods to beat the winter blues

(ARA) - The holidays have come and gone, and the long haul to the first day of spring can certainly take a toll on mood and energy levels. Don't let the winter doldrums get you down. Lifting your spirits may be as easy as eating the right mood foods.

Carbs to the rescue
Yes, eat carbs. Carbohydrates trigger the release of serotonin, a hormone that reduces pain and regulates mood. Healthy carbohydrate foods that you should always keep on hand include whole grain breads and crackers, brown rice, cereal and fruits. Try spreading a small amount of peanut butter on a sliced apple for a mid-afternoon snack. The natural carbs of the apple will help to relax your mind and improve focus. Additionally, the protein from the peanut butter provides a jolt of energy, keeping you full feeling until dinner.

Tuh-may-toh or tuh-mah-toh?
No matter how you pronounce it, one thing is certain - canned tomatoes are an essential ingredient no pantry should be without. In his new book "The 10 Things You Need to Eat" chef, author and TV host Dave Lieberman lists tomatoes as one of the 10 foods you should eat. Why? Because studies show tomatoes - rich in vitamins and lycopene - provide a mood-improving energy boost, and may also help reduce the risk of heart disease and certain types of cancers.

"Experts say, unlike most fruits and vegetables, tomatoes are most nutritious when they are cooked," says Lieberman. "In fact, canned tomatoes, which I always have in my pantry, contain more nutrients and lycopene because they are pre-cooked, enhancing their nutritional content."

Go a little nutty, without really losing it
The lull between lunch and the end of the work day can sometimes feel like an eternity, causing us to feel lethargic and irritable. Pull yourself out of the mid-afternoon slump with a handful of nuts or seeds, such as almonds, walnuts or sunflower seeds. The protein in nuts is perfect for a quick pick-me-up, and just a small handful packs a powerful punch of B6 vitamins - key nutrients in the creation of mood-enhancing serotonin to calm anxiety. Keep a jar of raw almonds in your desk, or mix up your favorite trail mix for a homemade de-stress treat.

Nothing fishy about this
Tuna packs a tasty trifecta of nutrients - inflammation-reducing omega-3s, emotion-enhancing B vitamins and serotonin-increasing vitamin D. Tuna is a good source of lean protein, which helps to sharpen awareness and alertness. Spread tuna on whole grain crackers for a quick lunch or for a stress-relieving dinner, reach in your pantry and toss tuna with a can of chopped spinach and whole wheat pasta to wind down after a long day.
Get moving
It is no surprise that most Americans spend a significant amount of time each day traveling to and from work, sitting at a desk, staring at a computer, and then settling down on the sofa to watch hours of television. But experts recommend that everyone should get at least 30 minutes of exercise a day, which increases serotonin levels and gives you a natural high. This can even be accomplished in 10-minute intervals if you can't always find a free half-hour. Walking is one of the most efficient and effective forms of exercising - it relieves stress, lifts your mood, and helps you get a better night's sleep.

Avoid the crash
Eat small meals or snacks every few hours to avoid peaks and valleys in blood sugar, and maintain positive energy levels. When you start to feel like you are running on empty, resist the urge to reach for caffeine. It's good for a temporary lift, but too much caffeine is linked to depression, anxiety and mood swings, the latter which can make you crash even harder.

The most important thing is to set realistic, attainable goals and build activity and healthy eating into your daily routine.

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