

15 Nutrient-Dense Foods to Add to Your Diet

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Do you want to elevate your way of eating for higher energy and vibrant health? Let's review—from a holistic perspective—different practices that may be affecting the nutritional density of food, then let's explore ways you can raise the bar on the [energy-rich but nutrient poor](#) standard American diet (SAD).

A Holistic View

For starters, what does nutrient density mean? *Nutrient-dense foods* are typically real and unprocessed foods, and have not been chemically altered or filled with synthetic ingredients. When it comes to foods and food products, many items are labeled with [health and nutrition claims](#). Although the original food labeling concept was well intended, questions around [food safety and food production practices](#) have come into question over the years. Along with the rise of large-scale [monoculture farms](#) has come the use of many chemical pesticides and fertilizers for a small

number of genetically engineered crops; the nutritional value of these foods and the ecosystems you depend on is compromised.

You know that fruits and vegetables are good for you. However, a lot has changed in how they are grown since the days of your ancestors. Curiosity has piqued for consumers wanting to learn more about their food, such as where their food comes from, whether it's organic and if it's [genetically modified](#) (GM), and even the distance it's traveled! Surprisingly, some studies show that the length of travel can cause fresh foods to [lose up to 45 percent of their nutritional value](#). Let's dig in and explore some reasons why your foods rich in nutrients may be steadily decreasing.

Overfed and Undernourished

Processed foods are a significant portion of the American diet and, even more so, [ultra-processed foods](#), which are defined in a cross-sectional study as “industrial formulations which, besides salt, sugar, oils, and fats, include substances not used in culinary preparations, in particular additives used to imitate sensorial qualities of minimally processed foods and their culinary preparations.” According to the study, they made up 57.9 percent of energy intake and contributed 89.7 percent of the energy intake from added sugars. According to the study authors, “The average content of added sugars in ultra-processed foods was eightfold higher (21.1 percent) than in processed foods (2.4 percent) and fivefold higher than in unprocessed or minimally processed foods and processed culinary ingredients grouped together (3.7 percent).”

Genetically-Modified Organisms

Another factor to consider is the concept of large-scale food cultivation that has been increasing over the last [100 years](#). Modern farming practices through the rise of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs)—foods made by changing the genetic makeup of a plant or animal in ways that it does not develop in nature—have been extremely controversial. According to a

survey conducted by the [Consumer Reports National Research Center](#), “The majority of GMO crops currently in the market have been genetically engineered to produce their own pesticides and/or withstand herbicides that normally would kill them.” ([Today’s Dietician](#) brings to light differing viewpoints, the opinions of those who believe GM foods are hazardous to the environment and human health because of the pesticides and herbicides involved in producing them.) Proponents follow the FDA’s recommendations; research has thus far shown them to be safe.

In fact, some people believe that GM foods “have the potential to solve many of the world’s hunger and malnutrition problems, and to help protect and preserve the environment by increasing yield and reducing reliance upon synthetic pesticides and herbicides,” according to research in the [Journal of Food Science and Technology](#). There is much debate not only about the level of nutrition in our food but also about the impact of growing methods on human and environmental health as a whole.

What Do Americans Eat?

Now let’s take a look at what Americans are currently consuming with regards to nutritional intake. From 2013-2016, more than 1 in 3 U.S. adults ate fast food on a daily basis, according to the [National Center for Health Statistics](#). That’s a staggering 36.6 percent of adults. When you take into consideration the extent to which the nutritional value of fast food has also significantly decreased over the last 30 years. Fast food’s nutrient density, according to [research](#), is being compromised by an increase in portion size, energy, and sodium content. Also, in 2010, [food consumption trends](#) revealed a significant increase in total spending on food away from home—a whopping \$594 billion or 48 percent.

As you can see, there are multiple and often complex factors contributing to dietary-related health issues impacting nutrient density in the United States. [Research shows](#) there is a continuing rise in global rates of obesity as a byproduct. This epidemic doesn’t only have serious ramifications for

health and well-being, but also for the environment and the economy, according to [Science Direct](#).

Food Elevation Through Mindful Application

Now that we've covered some areas affecting nutrition density, let's explore how to apply this knowledge to raise the bar on our food shopping decisions for higher nutrition density. [Studies show](#) that increasing nutrient density through food can help break the cycles of malnutrition and obesity. It is possible through conscious daily actions, so let's focus on a handful of ways you can choose the most nutritious food possible.

- **Grow an edible garden:** By growing your own high-quality, pesticide-free vegetables you will do your food (and body!) good. Use organic heirloom seeds or seeds labeled “heritage” or “old-fashioned”—these are high-quality seeds passed down by farmers and gardeners. Gardening also helps you reduce your environmental footprint by reducing the distance your food travels while saving water and fossil fuels.
- **Eat on the wild side:** Another fabulous way to start is by adding more nutrient-rich greens to your diet. As a rule of thumb, the most intensely colored salad greens have the most phytonutrients, according to journalist Jo Robinson in her book *Eating on the Wild Side*. Including bitter foods such as dandelion greens, arugula, nettles, and broccoli rabe to name a few. Bitter foods can [enhance digestive health](#), [support nutrient absorption](#), and improve [gut health](#).
- **Look for a rainbow of colors:** Fruits and veggies are full of [phytonutrients](#), which are compounds plants use to protect themselves from insects and disease naturally. When you eat them, you absorb those same compounds that, in turn, protect you in many ways. One being “major diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes involve cell damage caused by chemicals called free radicals that antioxidants neutralize” according to [Scientific American](#). Since antioxidants are plentiful in fruits and vegetables,

including a variety of colors into your way of eating is extremely health supportive

- **Spice it up and praise the herbs:** These offer a powerhouse of antioxidants. Herbs and spices like turmeric, ginger, clove, oregano, and thyme are all among the commercially available spices with the highest total antioxidant capacity, according to [research](#).

Biodiversity

Since many nutrient-dense foods are fruits and vegetables, by including them more into your diet, you will also reduce your environmental footprint to support biodiversity in the diet. *Biodiversity* makes up the benefits of nature that make life livable on Earth. According to the National Wildlife Federation, [it includes](#) “everything from cleaning water and absorbing chemicals, which wetlands do, to providing oxygen for us to breathe—one of the many things that plants do for people.” A diverse diet, consisting of nutrient-rich sources of food, is key to health for people and the planet. “[Biodiversity] provides us with an array of foods and materials, and it contributes to the economy. Without a diversity of pollinators, plants, and soils, our supermarkets would have a lot less produce,” the National Wildlife Federation states.

As a rule of thumb, purchasing produce that is local and in season is [full of advantages](#) regarding nutrition density, as is purchasing [organic](#) produce when possible. In addition to including a variety of colors, dark leafy greens tend to be “more nutritious, calorie for calorie than any other food,” explains Dr. Frank Lipman in *The New Health Rules*. So next time you fill up your cart with a rainbow of colors, be sure to include some of these nutrient dense deep greens.

Now that you’re armed with some simple tips to navigate you toward your highest nutritional food potential, let’s explore 15 of the most nutrient-dense foods you can start incorporating into your diet today!

1. Kale

A single serving of [kale](#) has more calcium than six ounces of [cow's milk](#). Kale is the most bitter and nutrient-packed of all crucifers. [Studies show](#) kale is effective not only for helping to prevent cancer but also for slowing its growth. Store in the crisper drawer of your fridge and eat within a few days. You can lightly steam, sauté in extra-virgin olive oil, or make roasted kale chips!

2. Collard Greens

[These beauties](#) are full of vitamin C, and they're a great source of vitamin K. They are yet another leafy green that may offer [cancer killing benefits](#). When shopping for them in the store, look for dark green leaves that are crisp.

3. Spinach

Full of lutein, which helps [protect the eyes](#) and decrease [inflammation](#), [spinach](#) is one of the most popular dark leafy greens. When you bring it home, soak it in cold water, spin or pat dry, and then eat as soon as possible for the most nutritional benefit.

4. Cabbage

A nutritious veggie, [cabbage](#) does not go rancid quickly, so it's able to be stored in your fridge longer than many greens—up to weeks at a time without losing many nutrients. It's best to look for compact heads that are heavy, yet firm. Eating cabbage shortly after purchase will result in the most flavor as it loses its sweetness in a few days after being refrigerated.

5. Beet Greens

The [leaves of beets](#) are highly nutritious! Yet many people chop them off, not realizing their nutritional significance. The leaves have more antioxidants than the [roots](#) themselves, explains Jo Robinson in *Eating on the Wild Side*.

6. Watercress

A great source of folate and vitamin K, [watercress](#) has a subtle peppery taste and is an excellent addition to salads and soups. To store, fill a glass jar with water; place the stem ends of the herbs into the water in the container. Loosely cover the jar of watercress with a bag and store at room temperature.

7. Romaine Lettuce

This super versatile green is a fantastic source of antioxidants, vitamin A, and vitamin C. [Romaine lettuce](#) makes a good base for a salad any time of day. For the best nutritional gain, serve when it's fresh and crisp.

8. Arugula

Another name for this leafy green is [rocket](#). "It tends to be higher in antioxidants than most green lettuces," writes Jo Robinson in her book *Eating on the Wild Side*. It's best to place the greens in a micro-perforated bag and store in the crisper drawer of your fridge. Eat the greens raw for the most nutritional benefit.

9. Endive

[This leafy green](#) contains a flavonoid called [kaempferol](#) that is present in many edible plant-based foods. There are three main types: Belgian endive, curly endive, and broad-leaved endive.

10. Bok Choy

[This Chinese cabbage](#) is known for its detoxification benefits—great for [liver health](#)! It's delicious lightly sautéed with garlic and ginger. It can be stored in the fridge for three to five days in a plastic bag.

11. Turnip Greens

[These beauties contain choline](#), an essential nutrient that helps with sleep, mood, inflammation, and [memory](#). Store in the refrigerator for up to a week and enjoy raw or cooked. Try adding them to salads and stir-fries!

12. Broccoli

[Broccoli](#) lives up to its stellar reputation. Broccoli and broccoli sprouts are full of antioxidants and glucosinolates that make it a great [cancer-fighting food](#). The best way to preserve its nutrition density levels is to chill it as soon as its harvested and to eat it within two or three days. At the grocery store, look for broccoli with dark green crowns. Whole heads of broccoli are more nutritious than pre-cut florets, according to Jo Robinson in *Eating on the Wild Side*.

13. Brussels Sprouts

When shopping, look for [Brussels](#) that have tightly wrapped leaves that are bright green in color. They go rancid quickly, so put them in the fridge as soon as possible and eat within a couple of days. When you cook Brussels sprouts, trim and rinse the stems so they will cook as quickly as the leaves. Slice each in half top to bottom. Then steam on the stove for six to eight minutes for the most nutritional benefit. Some benefits include an association with a [decreased risk of cancer](#) and [cardiovascular disease along with other cruciferous veggies](#).

14. Parsley

[This fresh herb](#) is bursting with nutritional benefits. It is a free-radical scavenger, protects the brain, and is antibacterial and antifungal, as indicated in this body of [research](#). It even helps regulate bowel movements with its [laxative effects](#). Add this herb to your salads, put it in soups and spreads, or mix it into your favorite dip.

15. Mustard Greens

[This peppery green](#) has vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients. They are high in [glucosinolates](#) that have also been shown to help in the regulation of blood lipid levels, including levels of total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, and HDL cholesterol, according to the *World's Healthiest Foods* book by George Mateljan. When shopping for mustard greens, look for leaves that are crisp and dark green. To enjoy, lightly sautéing with olive oil or add young mustard greens to salads for a great nutritious addition.

Beyond the 15

Looking for some more nutrient-dense foods to include in your diet? Look to some other plants.

Try [seaweed](#), [berries](#), [asparagus](#), [garlic](#), [avocados](#), [legumes](#), and [cauliflower](#). Other non-plant sources of nutritious foods include [wild-caught salmon](#), [pasture-raised eggs](#), [sardines](#), [beef](#) or [chicken liver](#), and [shellfish](#).

There you have it! The best nutrient-dense foods are also unique to you and your tastes. If there is one simple take-home message it would be to keep in mind the nutritional power of quality—go with the highest quality when you can. Switch to the most fresh, real, organic, natural, locally produced version of that food and enjoy a greater nutrient density.

Combining the healthiest foods in combination with physical activity, the great outdoors, and doing things you enjoy to help manage stress is also vital to elevating your quality of life and expanding your health.

*Editor's Note: *The information in this article is intended for your educational use only; does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Chopra Center's Mind-Body Medical Group; and is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health providers with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition and before undertaking any diet, supplement, fitness, or other health program*

About the Author

Fran Benedict is a certified health and nutrition counselor and the founder of SimplyMindful.com. She has been on a path of health promotion and behavior for more than 15 years and loves discovering new ways to bring attention and intention into everyday life. She believes in the extraordinary power of the mind to create a quality of life every person deserves, with an emphasis on the relation to oneself as the foundation for everything else.