

## Healthy Options for Comfort Foods

*Fiona Hunter*

**We eat for all sorts of reason and often it has very little to do with hunger. 40% of UK adults admit to comfort eating when they feel sad, lonely, anxious or stressed. Fiona Hunter, Nutritionist and Food Writer discusses healthy alternatives to traditional comfort foods.**

### **Top comforts**

It probably comes as no surprise that in a poll carried out by the BBC chocolate topped the list of favourite comfort foods, closely followed by tea and biscuits, toast and ice cream, sausages and mash, fruit crumble and rice pudding. While studies show that men and women are equally likely to turn to food for comfort, women are more likely to choose things such as chocolate and biscuits while men are more likely to go for meals like bacon and eggs or sausages and mash. One explanation for this difference is that women either opt for snacks that require little or no preparation or the sort of food that they often deny themselves when they feel happy and in control. Men tend to crave the sort of foods that a mother, wife or girlfriend cooks for them.

### **Why chocolate makes sense...**

Some experts suggest that certain foods, such as chocolate, encourages the brain to produce the 'feel good' hormone serotonin. Others suggest a simpler explanation. The real reason people choose foods such as chocolate and biscuits when they are feeling low is because these are the sort of foods they were given when children as a reward for good behaviour or as a treat to cheer them up when they were feeling sad. Over time they have learnt to associate these foods with feelings of love, security and happiness.

Although a chocolate bar or a couple of custard creams may make you feel better for a while the feel good factor is usually very short lived. Researchers at the Priory Clinic found that 33% of women admitted they felt guilty after comfort eating. These feelings of guilt and worthlessness that many people experience after comfort eating only serve to make matters worse. Indulging in a tub of Haagen Daz after a row with your partner or eating a large plate of creamy mashed potato when you are feeling a bit down-in-the-dumps isn't going to do any harm once in a while. However, if comfort eating becomes a regular feature, we all know it can have a serious effect on our health not to mention a disastrous effect on our waistline.

### **Eating to beat the winter blues**

For some people cravings and comfort eating can be linked with the seasons. In the days before central heating and electric blankets our ancestors were programmed to eat more during colder months because they needed to build up their fat reserves to keep warm. Now of course we don't need the extra calories. If anything perhaps we should cut down on what we eat because many of us are less active in the winter.

There are other reasons why the type of food we want to eat changes with the weather. It seems there is a good reason why comfort food comes in the form

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of a pile of mashed potato, a plate of pasta or hunk of crusty white bread rather than an apple or a plate of carrots. The shorter days and lack of sunshine in the winter months reduces the production of serotonin, a hormone-like substance which promotes feelings of relaxation and happiness. Low levels of serotonin are not only linked with Seasonally Affective Disorder (SAD), believed to affect half a million people the UK, but also increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings.

### **Feeding the mind**

Carbohydrate craving may be a response mechanism to low levels of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is made from the amino acid tryptophan found in protein rich foods such as meat and cheese. Ironically eating a protein rich meal lowers levels of tryptophan and serotonin in the brain, while a carbohydrate rich snack has the opposite effect. Tryptophan is a large amino acid that shares an entry gate to the brain with several other amino acids. When you eat a protein rich meal you flood the blood with tryptophan and other competing amino acids which all fight for entry into the brain. Only a small amount of tryptophan is able to get through so serotonin levels do not rise appreciably. In contrast, a carbohydrate rich meal triggers the release of the hormone insulin which causes all amino acids, except tryptophan, to be absorbed into the cells. With the competition removed, tryptophan can freely enter the brain, causing serotonin levels to rise.

### **Comfort food doesn't have to be unhealthy food**

The fact that the body craves a different type of diet in the winter is not necessarily a bad thing. Foods like pasta and mashed potatoes are naturally low in fat, rich in complex carbohydrates and can provide important vitamins. Stews and casseroles, made with lean meat, poultry or fish are warm and filling and provide essential minerals such as iron and zinc. If you choose wisely comfort foods can also be healthy foods. There is no reason why your winter diet has to be any less healthy than your summer diet.

### **Healthy winter comfort foods**

#### **Start the day**

- A steaming bowl of porridge oats, drizzled with a little honey or maple syrup. Oats are rich in soluble fibre which will help slow the absorption of sugar.
- Other wholegrain fibre rich breakfast cereals such as shredded wheat, weetabix and branflakes are also a good choice.

You could also try;

- A wholemeal banana muffin
- Toasted cinnamon bagel with peanut butter
- Wholemeal toast with yeast extract or reduced sugar jam.

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## Mid-day Fueling

- Wholesome and hearty, soups are ideal. Pick vegetable based soups such as minestrone, tomato or leek and potato. Alternatively try red lentil or Tuscan bean. Avoid soups that contain a lot of coconut milk or cream. Serve with crusty wholemeal bread for some carbohydrate, fibre and B vitamins.

Other nutritious lunch time snacks include;

- Baked potatoes (for a tasty alternative try using sweet potatoes instead of white potatoes)
- Beans on toast
- A toasted wholemeal sandwich.

## Evening Comforts

- Warm and comforting **stews** and **casseroles** are perfect for warming you up on a cold winters evening. Use lean meat or poultry, trimmed of any visible fat and add beans or pulses and plenty of vegetables to boost the vitamin and fibre content. Serve with a baked **potato**, wholemeal **pasta** or brown **rice**.
- If you have to have **mashed potatoes** use warm skimmed milk to mash them and a little olive oil rather than butter.
- Nothing is more cheering on a cold winters day than a **hot pudding**. If you choose wisely they can be a healthy and nutritious part of a balanced diet. If you have the time to make your own remember to use semi skimmed milk or why not try soya milk instead? Make bread and butter pudding with wholemeal or Granary bread and add ready-to-eat dried fruits such as apricots or prunes to add natural sugars. You could also try rice pudding or for a real treat, apple crumble and low fat custard.

## Further reading

Somer, Elizabeth (Dec 1999). *Food & Mood* The Complete Guide to Eating Well And Feeling Your Best. New York. 2nd edition Holt Paperbacks. ISBN: 0 8050 6200 9