

7 Impressive Reasons To Eat Mushrooms

How this nutrient-rich fungus can boost your health



Throughout history, civilizations have treasured mushrooms as a source of strength and healing. Greeks believed eating mushrooms made warriors strong, while the Chinese culture has long considered them a medicinal food for healthy living. And today, Japan has an approved [mushroom-based drug to treat cancer](#).

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Mushrooms are popular in the United States as a flavorful, nutritious food. The average American eats nearly three pounds of mushrooms a year, according to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center. Many people also use mushrooms for [medicinal purposes](#) in dietary powders, liquids and supplements.

“We’ve long known that mushrooms are good for you because of their bioactive compounds, and we’re learning more about their benefits every day,” says dietitian Joyce Prescott, RD. “There are so many varieties to enjoy in a wide variety of dishes, and we can also [use them in many ways to supplement our diet and help keep us well.](#)”

What are the types of mushrooms?

Mushrooms are a fungus. Scientists have identified thousands of species, but only about two dozen are [widely accepted for use as food](#). Some mushrooms have psychedelic compounds (psilocybin) that cause hallucinations or an altered state of consciousness. Many others found in nature — like the “death cap mushroom” — can’t be safely consumed.

Unless you’re a mushroom expert, stick to your supermarket aisle to avoid poisoning or other side effects. You’ll still have plenty of options, though prices vary.

Some mushrooms have a rich umami (savory) taste, making them a good meat substitute. Others feature more delicate, earthy flavors. Button mushrooms, the most common mushrooms in the U.S., have a mild taste.

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Other, widely available types include:

- **Chanterelle**, shaped like a trumpet.
- **Cremini (baby bella)**, firm and dark.
- **Enoki**, small white stems with caps.
- **Maitake**, dimpled and spongy.
- **Oyster**, fan-shaped with a thin cap.
- **Porcini**, thick-stemmed with a reddish-brown cap.
- **Portobello**, brown with a thick, large cap.
- **Shiitake**, ivory-colored stem and a dark brown cap.

What's in a mushroom?

Mushrooms contain health-boosting vitamins and minerals, along with protein and fiber. For example, one cup of cremini mushrooms has only 15 calories, but 2 grams of protein and nearly 1 gram of fiber.

Mushrooms also contain compounds (including polysaccharides and sterols) that may help protect your health and prevent disease. Nutrients in mushrooms include:

- **Selenium:** Helps your body make antioxidants to prevent cell damage.
- **Vitamin B6:** Supports your nervous system and helps form red blood cells.
- **Riboflavin, niacin, and pantothenic acid:** Help carry out several metabolic reactions and are involved in the production of energy
- **Potassium:** Identified in the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans as an underconsumed nutrient. Helps muscles contract, assists with fluid balance and maintains normal blood pressure
- **Zinc:** Supports your immune system and healthy growth in babies and children.

7 benefits of eating mushrooms

Prescott dives into the exciting world of mushroom research. While research hasn't been extensive and more is certainly needed, some studies have shown that mushrooms may:

1. Boost your immune system

Chronic [inflammation](#) (long-term swelling) is associated with heart disease, cancer and other medical conditions. Mushrooms contain certain [antioxidants](#) that help protect your body from stress and prevent or slow cell damage.

Mushrooms also activate substances in your immune system that can enhance its ability to protect you against infection and disease, including the growth of tumor cells. [Some research](#) has found a potential link between higher mushroom consumption and lower cancer risk, especially breast cancer.

2. Lower blood pressure

Potassium is a mineral and electrolyte that helps your body control [blood pressure](#). Most Americans don't get enough potassium. Because mushrooms are rich in this mineral, they may help lower high blood pressure (hypertension). They may also reduce your risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

3. Support weight loss

[Research](#) suggests that a mushroom-rich diet can help you safely lose weight when combined with exercise and healthy lifestyle habits. In one study, people who substituted 20% of their meat consumption with mushrooms showed improved weight loss results.

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The flavor of mushrooms may reduce your need for added salt, too, which helps control your blood pressure. [Researchers](#) found that substituting mushrooms for half the meat in a ground beef recipe kept the taste but reduced sodium intake by 25%.

4. Supply vitamin D

Vitamin D2, a type of vitamin D, keeps your bones strong and muscles working properly.

Most of our [vitamin D](#) comes from animal-based sources, dietary supplements and good old sunshine. And here's a fun fact: Some mushrooms may have a label that reads "UV-treated" or "rich in vitamin D." That's because mushrooms contain ergosterol, which turns into vitamin D when exposed to ultraviolet light.

"These UV-treated mushrooms are enriched for your health," explains Prescott. "When mushrooms are exposed to ultraviolet radiation or even sunlight, the ergosterol transforms into vitamin D. So, you get a high concentration of vitamin D when you eat them, potentially enough to meet 100% of your vitamin D needs for the day."

You can buy UV-treated or vitamin D-enriched mushrooms at the store. Or try it at home:

1. Slice one portabella or three smaller, white button or cremini mushrooms.
2. Leave them in direct sunlight for as little as 15 minutes.

Sun and done!

5. Protect brain health

The nutritional value of mushrooms may help protect your brain from [mild cognitive impairment](#) (MCI). In [one study](#), participants 60 and older who ate more than two cups of mushrooms per week had a much lower risk of developing MCI. [Other research](#) suggests mushrooms rich in [polyphenols](#) and certain antioxidants may help protect against neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

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"This mushroom research is interesting because it could help with serious brain conditions that affect so many people," says Prescott. "We need to know much more, but early studies are promising."

6. Maintain heart health

Mushrooms are a boon for healthy heart lovers. Their nutrients and plant-based compounds can [help prevent plaque](#) buildup in your blood vessels. Substitute flavorful, low-sodium mushrooms for meat while keeping calories, fat and cholesterol levels low.

“Some mushrooms have taste and texture just like meat,” says Prescott. “And the benefits of substituting them for beef, lamb or other red meat can’t be beat. You get the nutrients and the low calories, sodium and cholesterol without sacrificing flavor.”

7. Improve gut health

Mushrooms contain substances you need to balance your [microbiome](#) (fungi, bacteria and viruses) in your gut and fuel the growth of good bacteria. By supporting your digestive system and immune system, mushrooms can help make sure that the nutritious food you eat keeps you healthy and strong.

Are mushrooms safe?

The answer is: It depends. Mushrooms you buy in a store are generally safe unless you have an allergy to mushrooms or mold (remember, mushrooms are fungi). [Wild mushrooms](#) you find in nature are much, much riskier to eat.

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It takes experience and expertise to identify mushrooms in nature you can safely eat. And even then, few wild mushrooms are safe to eat raw.

Dozens of mushrooms (often called toadstools) contain a deadly poison. Symptoms of mushroom poisoning typically appear within a few hours of eating mushrooms. They include:

- Confusion.

- Diarrhea.
- Difficulty breathing or slowed breathing.
- Dilated pupils or watering eyes.
- Excess saliva.
- Excitability.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Sweating.

Call 911 or seek medical attention immediately if you suspect you have mushroom poisoning.

Enjoy the healthy benefits of mushrooms

Mushrooms are a common and nutritious food, recognized around the world for their potential health benefits. With a range of safe, edible types to choose from, you can eat them in a [sandwich](#), mix them into [soups](#) and salads or even [substitute them for meat](#). They contain important substances known to ward off disease, while their interesting flavors and textures add flair to any dish. Impress guests — and yourself — with a healthy serving or two.
