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## How to comfort eat healthily in winter

When the weather gets colder, many of us look forward to getting cosy indoors with hot and hearty winter comfort foods. Unfortunately, these aren't always the healthiest and can make us feel tired and sluggish when the days get shorter and darker. With some small changes, however, it's possible to create tasty, comforting meals that are good for you too.

Sophie Medlin, director and specialist dietitian at [CityDietitians](#) and chair of the [British Dietetic Association for London](#), says the cold weather and darker nights can often make us reach for comfort foods.

"This may be an evolutionary mechanism from when we lived off the land, that is signalling to our bodies to [eat](#) more energy-dense foods in preparation for lower food availability in winter months," she says.

The feeling we get from certain foods can also have an effect on what we want to eat too, says Reema Patel, a registered dietitian at [Dietitian Fit](#).

"There is a strong link between our [gut and our brain](#). Studies<sup>1</sup> have shown that eating comforting food that we enjoy can lead to a release of the 'happy hormones' serotonin and dopamine, which leave us feeling comforted," she explains.

"Other ways to release the happy hormones include sunlight exposure or [exercise](#) - both of these are often reduced over the winter months, so food can become our go-to for comfort."

Additionally, people may experience a natural lower [mood](#) in [winter](#), which can lead us to comfort eat. "Often we eat comforting foods to give us a temporary feeling of pleasure," Patel adds.

# What foods are both comforting and healthy?

Not all comfort foods are [unhealthy](#). By including more high-fibre ingredients and [vegetables](#), it is easy to create nourishing, comforting meals.

"In colder months, soups, stews or curries can be warming," says Patel. "Mixing things up can help meals stay interesting and exciting. Try to focus on getting in some [whole grains](#) with meals, such as brown rice or pasta, or perhaps some quinoa or buckwheat. These are great to put into a soup or stew, or with a Thai coconut vegetable curry instead of white rice."

Try to also add in a source of protein with meals, such as chicken, fish, eggs, beans, lentils, tofu or Quorn. These foods help keep us more satisfied and fuller for longer.

Patel also advises that adding in a colourful mix of vegetables helps us get a range of [nutrients](#). "Try to shop seasonally," she says. "Vegetables such as kale, butternut squash, carrots, cauliflower, leeks, onions, pumpkin, cabbage and turnips are all in season at this time of the year."

Medlin recommends healthy, [fibre](#)-rich meals such as bean stews, stewed fruit with toasted oats and soups with crusty wholemeal or wholegrain bread. "It can also be helpful to add some additional vegetables, beans or lentils to dishes like shepherd's pie and lasagne to make them healthier," she says.

## What are examples of healthy, comforting recipes?

[Eating well](#) doesn't have to mean giving up on the foods you love. Instead, try swapping certain ingredients for [healthier versions](#).

If you fancy something rich and creamy, swap cream for Greek yoghurt in a curry or soup. "Or if you are craving some carbohydrates, try a tray of spiced roasted vegetables, including potato, [sweet potato](#), onions, parsnips, peppers and carrots," says Patel.

One of Patel's go-to comfort recipes is a pasta [bake](#). "I use wholemeal pasta as I find it more filling than regular pasta, and mix with some [chicken](#) pieces, cream cheese and then a few of my favourite vegetables - often broccoli and spinach," she says. "Frozen vegetables work great to help save preparation time in the kitchen, and they are very nutritious too."

She also suggests trying a lentil [Bolognese](#). "This can be made in advance or in the slow cooker and you can include a range of vegetables such as carrots, tomatoes, celery, onions and peppers to the lentils and then let it simmer away. Serve it in a bowl and don't forget a sprinkle of cheese," Patel adds.

### Winter comfort food recipes

Another good option is a **butternut squash soup**, which is full of vitamins and minerals. Enjoy with crusty, wholemeal bread.

A **lentil and sweet potato curry** is hearty and healthy. You can also cook a big batch and freeze it, so you have a quick meal when you're too tired to cook.

Try a **chicken, butterbean and pepper stew** on a cold day.

## What else do we need to include in our diets in winter?

To stay [healthy](#) all year round, we need to eat at least five portions of [fruit](#) and vegetables a day, as well as high-fibre or wholemeal starchy foods. It's also important to choose small amounts of unsaturated oils and spreads and to include protein. However, there are other things we can do in [winter](#) to stay well.

"[Winter](#) is the season for flus or other illnesses, so trying to ensure we have a good range of fruits and vegetables in our diet can help us get an adequate level of [vitamins](#) and minerals to help support our [immune system](#)," says Patel.

Keeping hydrated is important too, which means drinking between six and eight glasses of [water](#) a day - or more if you [exercise](#). When it is warmer, we are more likely to keep drinking water because we feel thirsty. In winter, it's easy to forget because it's cooler.

It is also recommended that everyone should take a daily 10 mcg (400 IU) vitamin D supplement from September to April. "This is because the best source of vitamin D is sunlight and there are few rich sources of vitamin D through our diet," says Patel. "If you are concerned about your vitamin D levels, please speak to your GP."

## Further reading

1. [Jacka: Nutritional psychiatry: where to next?](#)

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