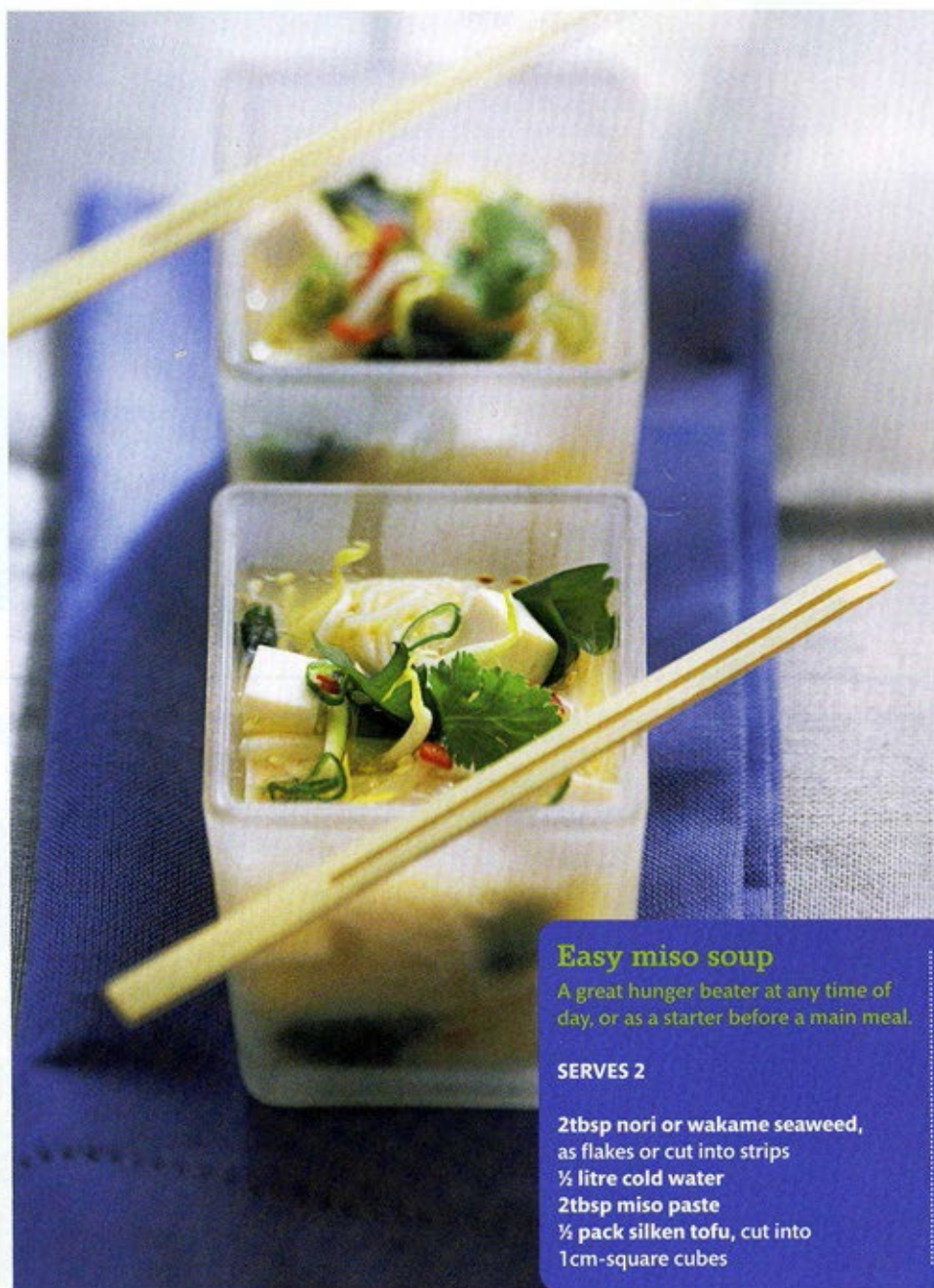


Turning Japanese

It's not all about sushi! Think crunchy veg, fragrant soup and dumplings and you'll have a better picture of this Oriental diet



Most of us think of sushi and sashimi at the mention of Japanese food, but while fish (cooked and raw) is

an important part of the national diet, it also features other flavours and textures, from pickled vegetables to miso soup.

Japanese food also offers many health benefits. With oily fish, mineral-packed veg, few sugary-processed foods and little meat, it's considered one of the world's healthiest diets. 'In Japan, people live longer than anywhere else on the planet, obesity is virtually unknown and 40-year-old women look like they are 20,' explains Naomi Moriyama, co-author of *Japanese Women Don't Get Old or Fat* (Vermilion, £7.99).

Moriyama maintains that the secret is the food, and scientists agree. Dr Dean Ornish, director of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in California, found that eating a Japanese-style diet can reduce the risk of heart disease and even reverse prostate cancer.

So what makes the Japanese diet so healthy? Low-fat protein from fish and soya, energy-boosting rice and noodles, mineral-rich seaweed and fresh veg are all eaten in abundance. All of this is washed down with green tea, which has been found to have health-enhancing »

Easy miso soup

A great hunger beater at any time of day, or as a starter before a main meal.

SERVES 2

2tbsp nori or wakame seaweed, as flakes or cut into strips
 ½ litre cold water
 2tbsp miso paste
 ½ pack silken tofu, cut into 1cm-square cubes

1 spring onion, finely chopped (optional)

- 1 Add the seaweed to the water in a pan and gently bring it to the boil.
- 2 Simmer and add the miso paste, stirring until dissolved. Don't let it boil, as this affects the flavour and destroys nutrients.
- 3 After a few minutes, add the tofu and spring onion and heat for a further minute or so, until the mixture is warmed through, then serve.

properties. It's also what the Japanese don't eat that keeps them healthy.

Their diet tends to be low in sugary, fatty processed food, while meat consumption – which, according to the World Health Organization, can increase the risk of heart disease and certain cancers if eaten in large amounts – is about half that of the UK and a third of the USA.

It's not all perfect – the Japanese tend to eat lots of salt, a high intake of which is associated with an increased risk of stroke, stomach cancer and high blood pressure. But if you can limit your salt intake while enjoying all the beneficial foods, you could be helping yourself to better health.

You don't even have to search out speciality supermarkets or restaurants, as Japanese-influenced chain restaurants can be found on most high streets. Plus many shops stock ready-made sushi and basic staples for using in home cooking.



Top five Japanese staples

Soya

This bean provides a form of low-fat but high-quality vegetable protein. In Japan, soya is eaten as edamame – steamed pods containing tender, green, pea-like soya beans that can be popped out and eaten as a snack. It's also enjoyed as tofu – either silken, firm, smoked, or fermented as natto. And finally, it's made into miso paste, which is used as a base for soups and sauces. All forms of soya contain a class of nutrients

called phytoestrogens, which have been found to be extremely beneficial to health,' explains Dr Margaret Ritchie, an expert on phytoestrogens at Napier University in Edinburgh. 'A high consumption of soya-rich foods in the Asian diet is thought to partly explain why the Japanese have far lower rates of breast and prostate cancers than in countries where a typical Western diet is eaten.'

Breast cancer rates in the UK, for example, are one in nine compared with one in 50 in Japan. 'Interestingly, research shows that intake of soya-based food reduces prostate cancer risk in UK men by 50 per cent,' adds Dr Ritchie.

Seaweed

Seaweed is used in many Japanese dishes. The most popular varieties in UK shops include nori, wakame and kombu.

'Seaweed is a rich source of iodine and other minerals that support overall health, especially for the thyroid gland,' says thyroid expert Dr Georges Mouton. 'In communities where seaweed is regularly on the menu, the incidence of disorders such as underactive thyroid [hypothyroidism] is much lower.'



Taste of the Orient

- Instead of crisps, try rice crackers. Avoid those that contain the flavour enhancer MSG.
- To add some tasty crunch to a salad, top with a sprinkling of nori (seaweed) flakes.
- For a warming drink, buy some ready-made sachets of miso soup and just add hot water.
- To add an Oriental flavour to any sauce, use miso paste instead of stock.
- Try noodles instead of pasta – the 100 per cent soba variety are wheat-free, so can be easier to digest.



Sesame salmon teriyaki

You can also use this technique for tofu (just cut into cubes) or chicken. Serve with brown rice and steamed green vegetables.

SERVES 2

2 salmon fillets
1 tbsp sesame seeds

For the marinade
1tbsp soy sauce or tamari (wheat-free soy sauce)
1tbsp mirin (Japanese rice cooking wine, from the Oriental section of supermarkets) or sherry

1 thumb-sized knob fresh ginger, peeled and finely grated
½tsp honey

- 1 Preheat the oven to 190°C/170°C fan/gas 5. Mix the marinade ingredients together.
- 2 Coat each salmon fillet in the marinade and chill for up to 2 hours (or cook immediately if short of time).
- 3 Coat each marinated fillet in sesame seeds and wrap in an envelope of greaseproof paper. Place on a baking tray and cook in the oven for 20 minutes, or until the fish is cooked through but still firm.



Green tea

More than just a drink, green tea has been used for centuries in Japanese traditional medicine to ease a range of ailments.

Researchers at the Yale University School of Medicine in the USA reviewed more than 100 studies on the health benefits of green tea to find out why it seems to protect against heart disease (the Japanese have far lower rates, despite smoking a lot).

They found that green tea contains a high concentration of antioxidants, particularly those thought to lower cholesterol levels and reduce blood stickiness. Polyphenols are also thought to protect against cancer and other degenerative diseases.



Oily fish

The Japanese eat more than three times as much fish as us Brits, and much of it is oily – salmon and mackerel, for example – which is packed with essential omega-3 fats.

'Omega-3 fats form a significant part of the structure of the brain and help make neurotransmitters, the brain messengers that help us feel, think and function at our best,' explains Lorraine Perretta, nutritional therapist and author of *Brain Food* (Pyramid, £5.99). 'They also help to keep our skin and hair soft and in good condition.'

Cruciferous vegetables

The Japanese eat about five times the UK average of cruciferous vegetables, such as broccoli, cabbage and Chinese leaf. They contain glucosinolates, natural substances that break down in the body to produce cancer-fighting compounds.

The best way to enjoy cruciferous veg is to lightly steam or stir-fry them. Better still, eat them raw – cabbage and Chinese leaf can also be shredded in salads, or use broccoli or cauliflower florets with dips for a starter.



Noodle stir-fry

This dish is super-quick and can be adapted to include any veg you want. You can also add prawns or strips of pre-cooked chicken or fish.

SERVES 2

- 250g soba or udon Japanese noodles
- Generous splash sunflower oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1 large handful sliced mushrooms
- 1 large handful shredded cabbage, Chinese leaf or pak choi

- 2 handfuls beansprouts
- 1 carrot or a small red pepper, chopped
- 1 large handful broccoli, cut into small florets

For the sauce

- 2tbsp soya sauce or tamari
- 2tbsp sesame oil
- 2tbsp mirin or sherry
- 1 in square knob ginger, finely grated

To garnish

- 1 spring onion, finely sliced
- 1 Bring a large pan of water to the boil and add the

noodles. Cook over a medium heat, uncovered, until soft but not mushy. Rinse under cold water and drain.

2 Pour the sunflower oil into a wok or large frying pan, add the onion and garlic and cook over a medium heat until clear but not brown. Tip in the rest of the vegetables and stir-fry for 4–7 minutes until the veg is lightly cooked and still crisp.

3 Add the noodles and all the sauce ingredients and stir through the mixture to heat.

4 Garnish with the spring onion and serve.