

Wonder fuel!

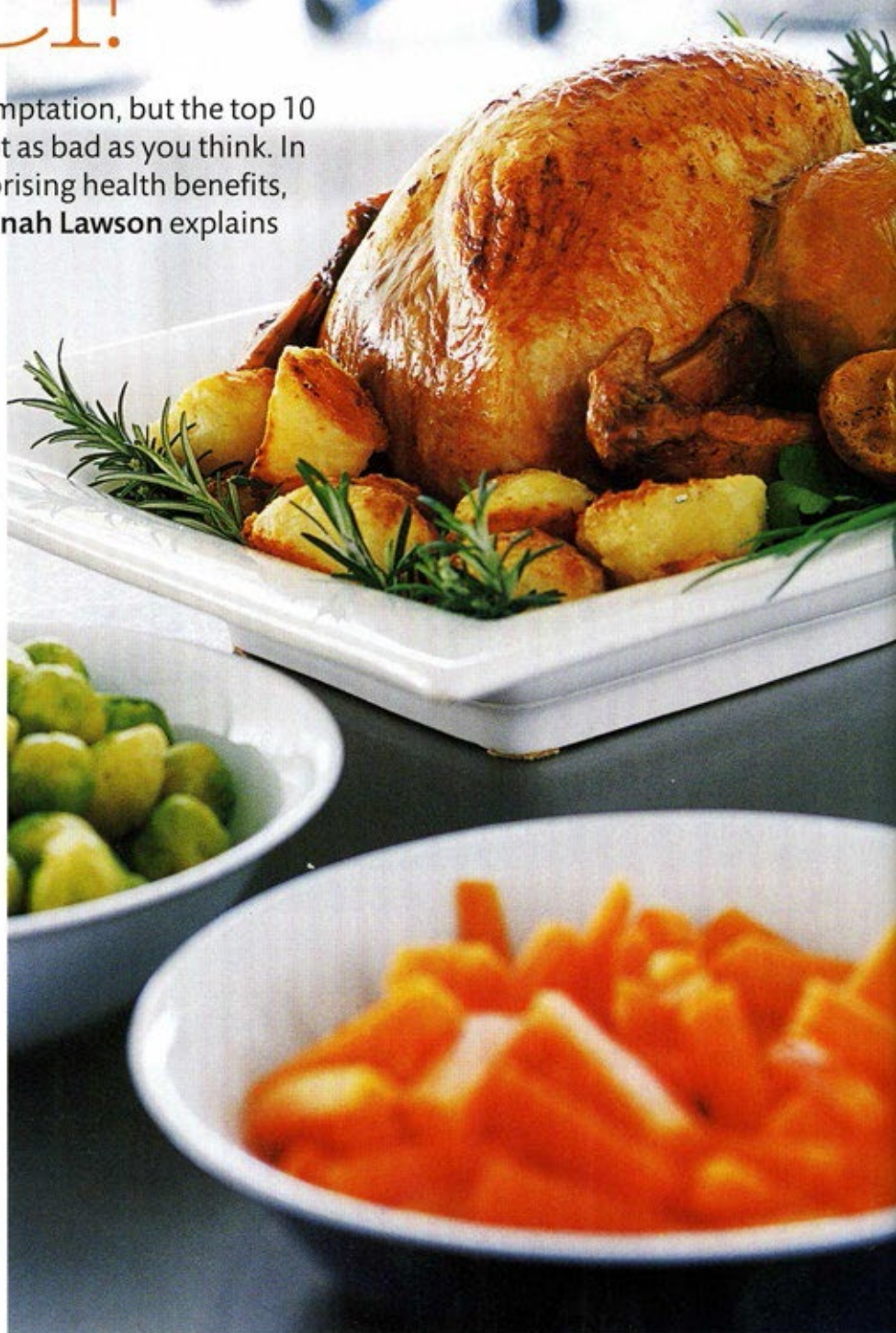
The festive season is full of temptation, but the top 10 traditional foods are often not as bad as you think. In fact, many contain some surprising health benefits, as nutritional therapist **Susannah Lawson** explains

1 Boost your mood with turkey

Like all poultry, turkey is high in protein, B vitamins and iron, but what sets this bird apart is that it's particularly high in an amino acid called tryptophan, which helps to make the feel-good brain chemical serotonin. People who suffer with depression often have low serotonin, which is why most anti-depressant drugs act to promote higher levels. But can eating natural sources really make much difference? In an Oxford University study where women were given a tryptophan-deficient diet, their mood plummeted in as little as six hours - but was restored as soon as tryptophan was added back in. You can boost your own levels by eating some turkey - the white meat contains higher levels than the brown. And if you're looking to cut your saturated fat intake, you can safely leave the skin as the tryptophan is concentrated in the flesh of the bird.

2 Herby stuffing: tailor-made medicine

Adding herbs to your stuffing can transform it into an aromatic and flavour-rich accompaniment - and, depending on which herbs you pick, can add extra medicinal properties. Garlic and onions help to thin the blood and reduce cholesterol, are anti-inflammatory, have potent anti-cancer properties and



contain immune-supporting compounds to fight colds, flu and infections. Parsley also has anti-cancer properties, can help to detoxify carcinogens including tobacco smoke, and has diuretic properties to bring relief from water retention. Sage can support digestion and ease flatulence, while thyme can help to soothe coughs and colds and calm inflammation in the lungs. And rosemary contains compounds scientifically proven to combat wrinkles, reduce water retention and protect the body from damage. Use them all and you'll really give your health a boost!

3 Cranberries for bladder health

These little red berries not only add a splash of colour to your plate if you serve cranberry sauce with your turkey, they also have strong antibiotic properties. Renowned in particular for their ability to help prevent urinary tract infections – which are more common if you drink more alcohol than normal – they contain compounds that prevent bacteria from being able to latch on internally, so flush out any potential infection-causing microbes. Cranberry juice is a delicious celebratory alcoholic-free drink, but look for low-sugar brands, as sugar feeds bacteria so can be counter-productive.



4 Brussels sprouts love your liver

A member of the cruciferous vegetable family, Brussels sprouts contain phytochemicals that have anti-cancer properties – in particular compounds called glucosinolates with powerful liver-detoxifying properties. In an ingenious recent study, volunteers were given Brussels sprouts that had the glucosinolates removed, versus regular Brussels sprouts. The regular Brussels eaters had 30 per cent more active liver enzyme function, showing just how powerful these little powerhouses are for helping you detoxify. Of course, as alcohol consumption often goes up over Christmas, the liver-supportive action of Brussels can help to counter some of the ill effects. They also contain fibre to keep your digestive system moving, and are rich in folic acid which is essential for brain and nerve health

(and important for foetal development in the first three months of pregnancy).

5 Treat your brain to smoked salmon

In our family, we always eat smoked salmon on rye bread as we open our presents before lunch. It makes a tasty starter – and the omega-3 fats it contains are beneficial for health. These fats are used in brain cells, and studies show that increasing levels can actually boost IQ, especially in children. Omega-3 fats also help to ward off heart disease – a daily intake has been shown to cut heart attack risk by half. They also have anti-inflammatory actions, which is why fish oils can help relieve the pain of arthritis. Fresh salmon and other oily fish are also rich in omega-3 fats, and if you fancy a traditional Scandinavian Christmas dish, pickled herrings are another good source.



6 Chocolate's dark secret

Chocolate gets a bad press. Yes, sugary milk chocolate with low levels of cocoa could never be classified as a health food. But dark chocolate with 70 per cent cocoa scores 13,120 on the ORAC rating which measures antioxidant levels in different foods. That puts it above berries, prunes, spinach, kale and broccoli! So swap the usual box of Quality Street for some delicious dark chocolate this Christmas. A few squares a day can boost your body's anti-ageing arsenal and help guard against cancer, heart disease and other degenerative conditions. But remember, chocolate does contain caffeine, so eating too much in one go can unsettle your energy levels.



7 Eat yourself young with Brazil nuts

The ubiquitous Christmas nut, Brazils are the richest-known food source of the antioxidant mineral selenium. Antioxidants repair damage in the body, so help to slow down the ageing process and reduce disease risk. Selenium also supports a healthy immune system,



and is an important fertility nutrient for men. Brazils are high in fat, however, and although much is the healthy unsaturated variety, try to limit your intake to no more than a handful a day.

8 Why Christmas citrus scores points

Clementines, satsumas and tangerines provide a welcome boost of vitamin C during the colder winter months. Citrus fruit pith also contains a substance called bioflavonoids which makes the vitamin C even more potent, so aim to eat a little with the flesh to get the full benefits. They have disease-protective effects, are anti-inflammatory and support a healthy immune system. Citrus fruits also help to detoxify the body, – useful if you're overindulging.

9 The fruity benefits of mince pies and Christmas pudding

It's no surprise that dried fruit features so heavily in traditional festive dishes when you consider fresh fruit was scarce before our era of refrigeration. The nutrients in dried fruit are often more concentrated than fresh. A heaped tablespoon of raisins, for example, provides one of your five a day, compared to one apple or two satsumas. Dried fruit is also a good source of fibre, which aids digestion, and contains higher levels of B vitamins, iron and magnesium than many other fruits, weight for weight.



10 Protect your future health with mulled wine

This festive drink contains substances that are actually good for you. The main ingredient, red wine, has long been credited with a range of health benefits. The grape skins that give it its colour contain resveratrol, which helps to thin the blood and reduce risk of cancer and heart disease (although this benefit is reversed if you consume more than a few glasses a day). The spices cinnamon and clove help the body process sugar, and studies have shown that cinnamon can reduce levels of harmful sugar in diabetics. They also have anti-inflammatory and blood-thinning properties. Finally, the calming actions of nutmeg make it a useful aid for seasonal stress. 