

Can eating a diet of brown rice, beans and seaweed really help you become a slimmer, more radiant and healthier person? Fans of macrobiotic eating would tell you that it can – as well as enhancing your longevity and warding off disease. But is this Japanese-style of eating really beneficial for everyone?

Certain high-profile fans certainly make macrobiotics look like good news. Madonna, for example, has followed its principles for many years, and not many of us would feel confident enough to cavort about in a leotard on MTV at 51. Gwyneth Paltrow was reported to eat nothing else during her 20s, and still follows many key aspects of the diet today. Nicole Kidman and Alicia Silverstone are said to be devotees, and even Pamela Anderson and Courtney Love have adopted a macrobiotic way of life.

So what exactly is a macrobiotic diet and what benefits can it bring you? In the words of Gwyneth Paltrow: 'Being macrobiotic is basically about eating local, organic, seasonal food that isn't processed.' Wholegrains form the main part of meals, along with vegetables and some pulses. Although a little fish is allowed,



MACROBIOTICS

made easy

You don't have to be a celebrity to get the health benefits from a macrobiotic diet. Find out whether macrobiotics will work for you and how to build the basic principles into a healthy lifestyle

WORDS Susannah Lawson

meat and dairy products are discouraged, as are any refined, processed or sugary foods.

The biggest health claim is that a macrobiotic diet can reduce your risk of cancer, and increase your chances of recovery if you already have it. While there is little evidence to support the latter, there is some research to suggest that the diet may help to decrease risk. The high levels of phytoestrogens (natural protective plant chemicals) in a predominantly grain and pulse-based diet have also been

found to reduce breast cancer risk.

Another reported benefit is weight loss – although some people don't benefit from such a high proportion of grains in their diet (see box overleaf). And the diet is said to improve digestion, which is probably as a result of eliminating common digestive irritants and soaking grains and pulses before cooking, making them easier to digest. The high fibre content and emphasis on chewing every mouthful thoroughly can also help to reduce symptoms such as constipation, bloating and flatulence. **©**

However, the diet can be low in high-quality protein, essential fats and, if no animal-derived foods are consumed, deficiency in vitamin B12 can occur. Intake of other B vitamins, vitamin D and iron may also be low. And the recommended elimination of 'nightshade' vegetables – potatoes, aubergines, peppers and tomatoes – can make eating out (or in) difficult. Some people do find that cutting these foods out of their diet can be beneficial – for example, reducing the pain and inflammation of arthritis. But most people would be eliminating a valuable source of plant nutrients unnecessarily.

Despite these potential downsides, the attraction for many is not just the diet, but the philosophy that's part of a macrobiotic approach to life. The key underlying concept of macrobiotics is balance – and while food is a major part of this, there is also guidance on finding ways to become calmer and more content. Particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between yin and yang and understanding how to balance these two opposing yet complementary forces. According to the Kushi Institute of Europe, an authority on macrobiotics, 'To understand this simple principle and then to live its basic laws is the greatest way to perfect health and long life.'

The best of macrobiotics

Even if the complete diet doesn't appeal, you can still benefit your health by adopting some of the key principles.

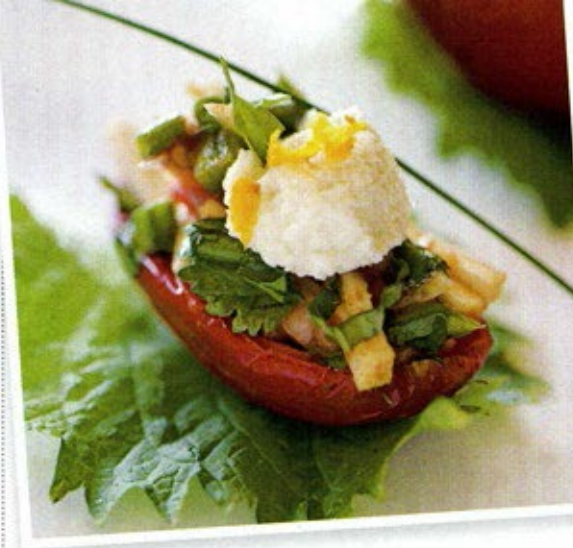
Choose whole foods over processed or refined foods – they contain more fibre and nutrients and provide a more sustained source of energy. So opt for brown rice, wholemeal bread or oats instead of white rice, white bread or sugary cereals.

Eat seaweed – it is a rich source of iodine (important for thyroid health) and contains folic acid and trace minerals such as calcium, magnesium and manganese. Buy it in packs from a healthfood shop, then toast it and sprinkle over vegetables or salads, or soak it and add to salads or stir-fries.

Eat some beans – they are a good source of fibre and nutrients, and also contain phytoestrogens, which can aid hormone balance in both women and men.

Limit your intake of sugary foods – they don't contribute anything nutritionally and can unsettle your energy levels.

Chew each mouthful thoroughly and relax while eating – this can really enhance digestion.



The macrobiotic menu

WHOLEGRAINS

These make up 40-60 per cent of the diet and, where appropriate, should be soaked for seven hours before cooking. Key grains include brown rice, barley, millet, spelt, whole oats, rye, buckwheat and pearl barley. Occasionally include wholewheat or buckwheat noodles, yeast-free bread, couscous, polenta, rye or barley flakes and quinoa.

VEGETABLES

The idea is to include around 20-30 per cent of fresh, seasonal – and if possible, organic – produce with every meal. Potatoes, tomatoes, peppers and aubergines should be excluded. But green leafy varieties (eg kale, greens, watercress) plus leeks, cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, squash, cauliflower, onions, carrots, parsnip, radish and shiitake mushroom are all encouraged.

PULSES

Recommended once a day (but no more) and, if dried, should be soaked for seven hours before cooking. The key players are azuki beans, black soybeans, chickpeas and green or brown lentils. To a lesser extent, black-eyed peas, split peas, kidney, lima, mung or pinto beans can be used, along with prepared soya-bean products such as tofu and tempeh.

SEAWEED AND SEASONINGS

Macrobiotic cooking makes use of a range of seaweeds to add both flavour and nutrients. Sea vegetables such as nori, wakame, kombu and dulse are all available from Asian supermarkets. Miso paste and shoyu (a traditional Japanese soya sauce) are the most common seasonings, along with a little natural sea salt. Garlic, ginger, mirin, tamari, umeboshi plum

Are you metabolically suited to macrobiotics?

When it comes to diet, we are all different. Some of us thrive on a high proportion of carbohydrate-based foods such as grains and beans – because the body processes these more slowly. These people are called 'slow oxidisers'. But if you burn through your food more quickly as a 'fast oxidiser', too many grains and not enough meat, fish and other animal-derived proteins are going to make you feel tired. To see which you are, keep a diet diary and have some days protein-based (eggs for breakfast, chicken for lunch), and others more carbohydrate-based (porridge, sandwich). Then see which foods gave you more energy. If you work better with more protein, don't follow the macrobiotic diet to the letter, but incorporate some of the more beneficial elements.

(pickled plum) and wasabi (horseradish) can also be used occasionally.

OTHER FOODS AND DRINKS

Meat and dairy foods should be avoided where possible, but fish is allowed two to three times a week, as are a few handfuls of nuts and seeds and some fresh or dried fruit. Sugar is not recommended, but natural sweeteners such as brown rice syrup, barley malt and fruit juices can be used to make occasional desserts and treats. Normal tea and coffee should be substituted for green or roasted barley tea. And spring water or vegetable/fruit juice should be drunk in place of fizzy or sugary drinks. ☺

Further information

- Macrobiotic Guide (www.macrobiotics.co.uk)
- The Kushi Institute of Europe (www.macrobiotics.nl)
- *Modern Day Macrobiotics: Transform your Diet and Feed your Mind, Body and Spirit* by Simon Brown (Carroll & Brown Publishers, £12.99)
- *Macrobiotics for Dummies* by Verne Varona (John Wiley & Sons, £14.99)