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## Four reasons to load up on autumn and winter veg

By Susan Low

**From pumpkins and parsnips to carrots and cavolo nero, these seasonal vegetables are packed with the good stuff – and they taste great too.**



The colder months bring with them a bounty of vegetables (okay sure, *technically* pumpkins and squash are fruit) that not only look great on our plates with their rich, warming colours, but carry health benefits, too. Here's why autumn and winter veg is worth working into your meals.

### 1. They help us avoid infection

When cold and flu season comes knocking, it doesn't do any harm to focus our dietary efforts on supporting our immune system. And vitamin A is one of the many nutrients our body needs to protect itself against infection, explains Dr Sue Reeves, a registered nutritionist and head of undergraduate studies at Roehampton University. "It helps our immune systems work properly and is needed for healthy skin, the production of mucus (for mucus membranes, such as in the mouth) and eye health."

We get our vitamin A not only by consuming it, but also by creating it in our bodies. To do that, we need beta-carotene. This pigment, which our liver converts into the body-loving vitamin, is abundant in winter's vibrantly coloured fruit and veg, says Sue. "Beta-carotene is a plant pigment found in orange, red and yellow fruits and vegetables. Good sources of beta-carotene include carrots, red peppers, sweet potato, apricots, mangoes and even green leafy vegetables such as spinach."

That's as well as the likes of pumpkins, butternut squash, savoy cabbage, kale and brussels sprouts.

Of course, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Official NHS guidelines state: 'You should be able to get all the vitamin A you need by eating a varied and balanced diet. If you take a supplement that contains vitamin A, do not take too much because **this could be harmful**.'

Vitamin C is also key as part of an immune-supporting diet (as well as helping keep skin healthy), and you'll **find it in spades** in brassicas like broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts. Diabetes UK says these winter veggies all have more Vitamin C weight-for-weight **than oranges**.

## 2. They can contribute to energy levels and focus

Iron plays a huge part in giving us some get-up-and-go, which many of us find ourselves lacking – in the winter particularly. Without enough iron, there will be fewer red blood cells zipping around the body transporting oxygen to cells and muscles, which, unsurprisingly, can lead to fatigue.

This is another nutrient that many people in the UK – particularly pre-menopausal women – are **not getting enough of**, says the British Dietetic Association. Spinach, kale and broccoli

are particularly good sources of this mineral (which also has a part to play in immune function), so fill up your basket with them this winter while they're at their best.

Those same rich, leafy vegetables – along with cabbage – are also particularly rich in folate, which is vital for those red blood cells too (as well as being particularly important for women who are pregnant or trying to conceive).

### 3. They could help ward off serious diseases

As the **NHS points out** , including plenty of fibre-rich foods in your diet can reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and bowel cancer. It can also improve your blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Yet most of us (we're talking 90 percent) **don't consume enough fibre**.

In the UK, adults eat about 20g of fibre a day, despite government guidelines stating we should be getting around 30g. It's about quality as well as quantity, though. See, the thing with fibre is that there are **lots of different types** which come in different foods. So, to feel the benefits, we need to be getting fibre from lots of different sources.

The good news is that a whole array of cold-season veg comes packed with the stuff. In fact, cauliflower, broccoli, beetroot, potatoes (with the skin on), and Brussels sprouts are some of the most fibre-rich vegetables there are.

Fibre aside, studies are starting to uncover the potential power of some specific vegetables when it comes to life-threatening conditions.

For more than 20 years, Dr Kirsten Brandt, senior lecturer in food and human nutrition at Newcastle University, has been studying the role of plant compounds called polyacetylenes, which are found in autumn and winter veg like carrots, celery and parsnip, as well as others. In particular, her research has shown a correlation between carrot consumption and cancer – something that is echoed in **numerous other studies** .

She says, “Different studies with different participants and different types of cancer have found similar risk reductions of developing cancer – of approximately 17 percent – in participants who ate four carrots per week.” That's when compared to a group who ate fewer or none.

## 4. They're versatile and good value

Buy produce when it's in season, and you'll get great bang for your buck in terms of quality, flavour and nutrients. That means hardy winter veg like chard, celeriac and turnips, along with all the other examples we've mentioned above, will be some of the best value foods on greengrocers' shelves right now.

Plus, there is no limit to the number of ways these veggies can be prepped and enjoyed. As well as roasting and baking in the oven, you can bung them in your slow cooker or air-fryer, or simply boil or steam them.

To retain all the vitamins and minerals in your veg, be careful not to overcook them or let them soak in water ahead of time, says registered nutritionist Sarah Jackson. "If you prefer boiling vegetables, keeping them out of water prior to cooking and cutting them into bigger chunks can preserve some of the nutrients." This will ensure that the beneficial compounds they contain won't leach out and get washed down the drain.

If you like your veg boiled, steaming could be a great alternative, as it gives a similar result while not allowing those nutrients a chance to escape.

Frying or stir-frying with a small amount of oil is another technique that can help make the most of a vegetable's benefits. "Vitamin A and beta-carotene are fat soluble, which means they are more likely to be absorbed from food if they are cooked where fat is present."

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