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Season's Eatings: The Top 10 Healthiest Foods for Spring

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by Tiffany Owens for MSN Health & Fitness



These days, the concept of eating foods "in season" has all but lost its meaning. Modern processing techniques and worldwide distribution has now made a variety of foods available year-round—it's nearly impossible to gauge whether it's January or July from looking at a typical produce bin.

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However, buying seasonally harvested and locally grown produce from farmer's markets and organic grocers not only helps sustain regional agriculture but also assures you're getting the highest quality in freshness and taste. This produce is free of both the preservatives used to keep imported foods fresh and the genetic modifications of so-called "Franken"-fruits and -vegetables. Additionally, eating seasonal and regional foods is one of the healthiest ways to restore balance to the body during the cyclical changes in weather, daylight and temperature.

Get into the green

"Spring brings a lightness and warmth that allows us to leave behind the heavier foods of the winter months," says Karen Seibert, lead nutritionist at New Seasons Market in Portland, Oregon. "It is also a time for growth and rejuvenation. Often, people associate spring with cleaning closets or the garage, but it is also an important time for giving the digestive organs a good 'sweeping out.' "

So why not extend spring's fresh start to the way we eat? Below are the top 10 freshest and healthiest food picks of this life-renewing and regenerative season.

1. Asparagus. "Asparagus is the trumpet that announces spring has arrived," says Gabriel Langholtz, special project manager of New York City's Greenmarkets. Rich in vitamins A and C, calcium, iron and folate (the world's most common vitamin deficiency), asparagus has been prized for its culinary and medicinal purposes since ancient times. Choose asparagus stalks that are rounded, with firm, thin stems and dark green or purplish closed tips. Just one cup of cooked asparagus provides 67 percent of the daily requirement for folate, essential for heart health and prevention of birth defects.

2. Green beans. Harvested while still immature when the inner bean is just beginning to form, they are one of the few bean varieties that can be eaten fresh. With a healthy supply of beta-carotene and vitamins A and C, green beans help protect the body's water-soluble parts from oxygen-free radical damage.

3. Spring Chinook salmon. The health benefits of eating fatty, cold-water fish are widely known, but salmon contains the highest volume of omega-3 fatty acids, essential for maintaining good heart health. Choose wild over farmed salmon whenever possible.

4. Spinach. A Mediterranean favorite since the 16th century, spinach is a rich source of vitamin A (for cardiovascular health) and vitamin K (for bone health). Just one cup of cooked spinach provides 294 percent and over 1,000 percent, respectively, of the daily value for each. George Mateljan of the World's Healthiest Foods foundation notes that spinach contains at least 13 different flavonoid compounds that serve as powerful antioxidants and anti-cancer agents.

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5. Apricots. The true fruits of spring, apricots were first discovered in China and have been cultivated for more than 3,000 to 4,000 years. Not only do apricots help satisfy a sweet tooth, but the vibrant red, orange and yellow hues signal a plentiful supply of antioxidants. They are also rich with beta-carotene and lycopene, two carotenoids important in reducing the artery-clogging LDL cholesterol and maintain a healthy heart.

6. Spring onions. Also known as scallions or green onions, these tasty vegetables are available year-round but are at their peak when they make their debut in those first few weeks of spring. Onions have been the subject of new research linking them to lower incidence of certain cancers. They also provide vitamins A and C, calcium and iron.

7. Green peas. Although they date back to biblical times, it was not until the 17th century that green peas were made popular by France's King Louis XIV. Green peas are a rich source of folate and a wide range of B vitamins, essential for the proper metabolism of fats, proteins and carbohydrates. Green peas are also chock-full of lutein and zeaxanthin—both powerful antioxidants.

8. Basil. A popular herb that can enhance the flavors of your favorite pasta sauce or spring salad, basil is a wonderful source of vitamin A.

9. Avocados. Previously avoided by dieters due to their high fat content, avocados have made a comeback as a great source of heart-healthy monounsaturated fats to help lower cholesterol. By volume, avocados are also 50 percent higher in potassium than bananas.

10. Spring greens. "What makes spring different is the number of fresh, succulent greens available," says New Seasons' produce buyer Jeff Fairchild. Choose from arugula, romaine, mesclun, bok choy and watercress to mustard, collard and dandelion greens. All are rich in lutein, beta-carotene, vitamin C, folate, minerals and fiber and excellent for digestion. For a tasty spring delight, Erica Simon, marketing manager for People's Food Co-op in Portland, Oregon, suggests an arugula pesto: Blend arugula, olive oil, garlic and chopped walnuts, spread over rustic bread and top with grilled asparagus and goat cheese.

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