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Mushrooms for Wellness

TIPS TO BOOST YOUR HEALTH

By Lexi Reich

Fungi may just be the future of the wellness world. While mushrooms have been consumed for thousands of years, health enthusiasts continue to uncover the medicinal benefits that various mushroom varieties offer.

Stephanie Romine, health coach and author of *Cooking with Healing Mushrooms*, spent years studying the power of mushrooms in Asheville before writing her guide to integrating medicinal and functional mushrooms into one's daily life. With the influx in popularity and claims to mushrooms as a "quick fix," Romine warns readers to be patient in their herbal healing journey.

"No single herb, mushroom or supplement is a cure-all," she says. "Don't expect major changes to happen overnight, and with any wellness or health regimen, you still have to put in the work. If you're taking cordyceps for stress but making no effort to reduce or manage the overwhelm you're experiencing, you can't expect your stress to simply disappear. As with herbs, supplements or even pharmaceuticals, you need to do your part to deal with the root cause of your issues, not simply treat the symptoms."

However, Romine is still a huge advocate for integrating fungi to boost natural health, and has a wealth of knowledge to share when it comes to getting started.

WHEN WERE YOU FIRST INTRODUCED TO MUSHROOMS?

“I was first introduced to mushrooms when I lived in South Korea back in 2005. Then in 2012, my husband and I moved to the mountains of North Carolina to prioritize healthy living. A temperate rainforest with unparalleled biodiversity, Asheville and the surrounding area is a hot spot for natural health, and I dove right in, learning about herbal medicine, foraging for plants and mushrooms and soaking up as much information about the natural world as possible. Having followed a plant-based diet since 2010, I felt drawn to natural and herbal medicine, including the healing power of mushrooms. I actually worked for an herbal supplements company for several years, where I spent a year working on education and marketing for a product launch that combined herbs and mushrooms. Now I live in Berlin, Germany, but I still cook healthy, seasonal, plant-based meals (with plenty of medicinal mushrooms) to fuel my active life and husband’s long-distance road cycling.”

WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS OF MUSHROOMS?

“If you’re new to mushrooms, start by picking an area of health to support. Reishi is called the mushroom of immortality, and it’s a tonic and adaptogen (meaning it supports your stress response). Reishi is a good one for immune health, sleep and overall longevity. Chaga and turkey tail are popular for immune support as well. If you’re an athlete or want an energy boost, try cordyceps. Yes, that’s the mushroom from *The Last of Us*, but it won’t turn you into a zombie. It’s an adaptogen that’s been used in Traditional Chinese Medicine — and promotes a healthy sex drive. If you’re at the supermarket, reach for shiitake mushrooms. They’re brimming with nutritional as well as immune benefits.

Mushrooms are best-known for their immunosupportive qualities, but different species have different benefits. Supplements like tinctures or capsules contain higher doses that are more potent and precise, but cooking with mushrooms is an easy way to reap their benefits.”

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHEN GETTING STARTED?

“In choosing mushroom extracts or tinctures, quality matters. Look for reputable brands, and shop at stores like your local co-op or other ‘healthy’ supermarkets that have their own set of standards for any products they carry. This will help you weed out the less reputable companies. Focus on brands that use mostly fruiting bodies.

Eating mushrooms as part of a healthy, whole foods diet is like squirreling away \$20 from each paycheck you earn. It doesn’t take much effort but builds up over time. However, if you’re in debt or close to retirement, those \$20 contributions won’t make much of a dent in your debt or be enough to live on in your later years.

If you’re interested in taking mushrooms therapeutically, such as in the doses used in clinical studies, talk to a naturopath or registered dietitian. You can have too much of a good thing. If you ate enough shiitakes, for example, to reach the clinical therapeutic dose of lentinan, you’d end up with a major bellyache — and some unsavory GI side effects.

While I firmly believe in the healing power of mushrooms, please know that these mushrooms aren’t magic. Some may have noticeable effects the first time you consume them, but most take a while. I felt calmer the first time I took reishi tincture, for example, but I’ve never noticed any changes in my body from eating maitake or shiitake, other than not getting sick all winter (which could be attributed to any number of health-preserving measures I take). Just as you need to take an entire course of antibiotics, you also need to give holistic treatments time to take effect. How long and how much are questions you should discuss with your health care team.”