



Mushrooms: How to Buy, Use, and Get More Out of Them

Mushrooms are one of the most practical ingredients to keep around. They cook fast, are common across global cuisines, and can turn your dinner from meh to marvelous!

Mushrooms are uniquely special: they are the only plant food that provide a natural source of vitamin D. But there's a catch, and straight to the spoiler: has to do with light exposure. Mushrooms contain ergosterol, which converts to vitamin D₂ when exposed to UV light. All common edible mushrooms can do this, although most store-bought mushrooms are low in vitamin D because they are grown in the dark. (See the box below for how to fix this!)

They also bring more to the table than vitamin D. Mushrooms are low in calories but provide significant amounts of B vitamins, copper, selenium, and potassium, along with compounds such as ergothioneine and beta-glucans that are being studied for their roles in antioxidant defense, immune function, and cardiometabolic health. The practical takeaway is that mushrooms are a nutrient-dense ingredient that can contribute meaningfully to overall diet quality, even though most people treat them as an add-on.

How to choose mushrooms

Look for mushrooms that are firm and dry. The surface should be smooth, not slimy or sticky, with no dark or wet spots. Buy them whole when possible, because pre-sliced mushrooms lose moisture faster and spoil sooner. Fun fact: White button, cremini, and portobello are actually the same mushroom at different stages. Buttons (the children) are milder, creminis (the teenagers) have more flavor, and portobellos (the adults) are larger and denser.

Varieties and when to use them

- White button mushrooms are the mildest and usually the least expensive. Use them in soups, sauces, omelets, and grain bowls where you want them to blend in.
- Cremini are a stronger everyday option. They hold up well to roasting, sautéing, pasta, tacos, and sheet pan meals.
- Portobellos work well sliced, grilled, or chopped into dishes where you want larger pieces that hold their shape.
- Shiitakes have a firmer texture and a more pronounced savory flavor. Use them in stir-fries, noodle dishes, broth soups, and rice dishes. The stems are tough, but useful for stock.
- Oyster mushrooms are more delicate, with thin edges that brown and crisp easily. They cook quickly and work well in hot pans or roasted in clusters.
- Maitake grows in clusters that get crisp at the edges and stay tender inside. It is a good choice for roasting or pan-searing when texture is the goal.
- King oyster mushrooms are best when mushrooms are the star of your dish. They're a good option if you want larger pieces that hold their shape. The thick stems can be sliced into rounds or slabs and seared or roasted, which is why they're often used as a "scallop" or steak-style mushroom.

What about dried mushrooms?

Dried mushrooms are an often overlooked pantry ingredient, prized for their concentrated flavor and versatility in broths, sauces, and grain dishes. It's often the secret ingredient that gives plant-based restaurant dishes a deep, savory flavor. Drying them concentrates flavor, especially in varieties like shiitake and porcini. When you rehydrate them, you get both the mushrooms and a soaking liquid that imparts extra umami to your sauce or marinade.

To use them, cover with hot water and let sit for about 20 to 30 minutes until softened. Lift them out, strain the soaking liquid to remove any grit, chop if needed, and use both in your dish. They work well in soups, broth grains, risotto, sauces, and braises where that deeper flavor has somewhere to go. They are less useful in quick sautéed dishes, where fresh mushrooms hold their texture better.

TNote that dried mushrooms are not a reliable source of vitamin D unless they were exposed to UV light before drying, which is not always the case.

How to store and clean

Store mushrooms in a paper bag in the fridge. This allows moisture to escape without drying them out. Avoid sealed plastic containers or bags, which trap moisture and speed up spoilage. Whole mushrooms typically last about a week. Pre-sliced mushrooms have a shorter shelf life. If they are visibly dirty, rinse briefly under water and dry thoroughly, or wipe with a damp cloth. Do not soak them. Excess water affects how they cook.

Cooking with mushrooms

When adding mushrooms to other dishes, cook and season them first rather than adding them raw. This allows them to release moisture, develop flavor, and avoid watering down the dish. They also work well as a finishing ingredient. Cooked mushrooms can be added to grain dishes, lentils, soups, pasta, stir fries, casseroles, taco fillings, and chilis; tossed on pizza or flatbread before baking; or used to top salads, power bowls, and toast after cooking, where they bring more flavor and texture than raw mushrooms.

Mushrooms release a lot of water before they brown, which is what makes them cook differently from most vegetables. On the stovetop, use a wide pan, enough oil to coat the surface, and avoid crowding. Let the mushrooms sit long enough to release moisture and then brown. If the pan fills with liquid, keep cooking. It will evaporate, and browning will follow. Interestingly, salt changes the timing. Adding it early pulls out water faster and speeds softening, which works well if you are cooking them down into a sauce, soup, or filling. Adding it later helps them hold their shape and develop more color.

Roasting works the same way, just in the oven. Spread mushrooms out on a sheet pan, use enough oil, and cook at a high temperature, around 425°F, until the edges brown and the moisture cooks off. Overcrowding leads to steaming here too. Air frying is a faster version of roasting. Toss mushrooms with oil and seasoning, cook at about 375–400°F, and shake once or twice so they cook evenly. They come out more concentrated and slightly crisp at the edges.

Marinating is useful, but it works differently than it does with meat. Mushrooms absorb liquid quickly, so long marinades are not necessary and can make them soggy. A short toss in something concentrated like soy sauce, miso, vinegar, or garlic before cooking is enough to build flavor.

How to increase vitamin D at home

- Slice fresh mushrooms to increase surface area, and place them gill-side up in direct sunlight for about 15 to 60 minutes.
- Direct outdoor sunlight is required. A sunny window is not effective because glass blocks most UVB light.
- The increase in vitamin D can be meaningful, although it varies based on sunlight and exposure time.

Crispy Mushrooms with Miso and Rice



Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons canola or other mild tasting oil (divided)
- 8 ounces mushrooms, torn or sliced
- 2 cups cooked rice (day-old works best)
- 2 tablespoons white or yellow miso*
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- 1 teaspoon maple syrup
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon grated ginger
- 2 green onions, sliced

Instructions:

1. Heat 1 tbsp oil in a wide pan over medium-high heat; spread evenly with a heat-resistant basting brush. Add the rice in an even layer and cook without stirring until the bottom is crisp, about 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer to a plate.
2. In the same pan, add the other tbsp of oil and the mushrooms. Spread them out and let them cook without stirring until browned on one side. Stir and continue cooking until the moisture releases and cooks off, then allow them to brown again.
3. Add the garlic and ginger and cook briefly. In a small bowl, mix miso, soy sauce, vinegar, and maple syrup. Add to the pan and cook until the mushrooms are coated and the sauce thickens slightly.
4. Serve the mushrooms over the crispy rice and finish with green onions.

*Miso is a fermented soybean paste that adds a deep savory flavor. It's easy to find in the refrigerated section near tofu or produce. If you don't have it, use a small amount of soy sauce and a pinch of something sweet to get a similar balance.