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Eat These Six Veggie "Superfoods" to Live Healthier and Longer

This is the first in a three part series about nature's healthiest superfoods. In Part 2, we'll focus on the most nutritious fruits, and in Part 3, we'll review the healthiest nuts. [Signup for our free online newsletter](#) to receive parts 2 & 3.

In 1826, the French gastronome Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es."

In English? *"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are."*

This simple phrase has been uttered, in one form or another, countless times since, because at the most basic level you are the product of your diet. Your energy levels, your weight, your complexion and your mood -- all can be influenced by the foods on your dinner plate.

When chosen wisely, food can do much more than just calm your growling tummy. It can help repair and restore your body, boost vital body processes such as your metabolism and immune function, and even offer a protective effect against chronic disease and acute illness.

With the right foods, your body will run like an efficient machine, coasting along life's peaks and valleys with the deftness of a gazelle. And as you plan your meals, each food, each ingredient on your list can act as your personal shield against disease, your very own elixir for good health and wellness.

At the crux of your food choices should be the so-called "functional foods" -- those foods that supply your body not only with nutrients, but also with extra "oomph" to help prevent and fight an array of health issues.

There are a variety of functional foods on the market today, many created in a lab where they are fortified with specific antioxidants and compounds intended to promote your health. But there are functional foods that come right from nature, too, and it is these natural functional foods that we will be focusing on in this article series.

Functional Food Group #1: Vegetables

This month, we've broken down the crème-de-la-crème of vegetables ... including those that offer a superior health advantage. In coming issues, we will be uncovering the top fruits and nuts for your health as well, so keep an eye out for those in the months to come.



Vegetables have earned a gold medal in the functional food arena because study after study shows that those who eat generous amounts of veggies are likely to have a reduced risk of chronic diseases ranging from stroke and heart disease to cancer and cataracts compared to those who eat only a small amount.

Unfortunately, most Americans are not getting nearly enough.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *State Indicator Report on Fruits and Vegetables, 2009*, only 27 percent of adults and 13 percent of adolescents are eating the recommended three or more servings of veggies a day. ¹

So if you're looking for a simple way to boost your family's health and well-being, adding more of the following healthy veggies to your diet is a wise step.

The Six Top Veggies for Your Health

1. Cruciferous Veggies

Broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, cabbage, and bok choy are examples of the powerhouse, cancer-fighting cruciferous veggies.

They contain components that may help regulate a system of cancer-fighting enzymes in your body, while helping to stop the growth of cancer cells.²

Among the most promising compounds in cruciferous vegetables are indole-3-carbinol and isothiocyanates. These glucosinolates are formed when the vegetables are chopped or chewed, and studies show they offer a protective effect against cancer.³

For instance, indole-3-carbinol may help deactivate an estrogen metabolite that promotes tumor growth, especially in breast cells, while increasing the level of a form of estrogen that may protect against cancer. This compound may also help stop the movement of cancer cells to other parts of your body.

Cruciferous veggies also contain sulforaphane, a type of isothiocyanate that boosts your liver's ability to detoxify carcinogenic compounds and free radicals.

Aside from lowering your cancer risk, eating cruciferous veggies can reduce oxidative stress in your body. This is important because oxidative stress, which occurs when free radicals become excessive in your body, has been linked to a range of diseases such as cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and rheumatoid arthritis.

In one study funded by the National Cancer Institute, eating 1 to 2 cups of cruciferous vegetables a day resulted in a 22 percent drop in oxidative stress.⁴

Fortunately, when it comes to cruciferous veggies there's a variety to suit virtually everyone's taste. For best results, try to include a variety of the following cruciferous veggies in your family's diet:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Broccoli• Brussels sprouts• Cabbage• Cauliflower• Collard greens• Kale• Kohlrabi• Mustard greens• Rutabaga	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Turnips• Bok choy• Chinese cabbage• Arugula• Horseradish• Radishes• Daikon• Wasabi• Watercress
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2. Green Leafy Vegetables

Spinach, Swiss chard, romaine lettuce and other leafy greens are a second veggie category that should make a regular appearance on your dinner (or lunch) plate.

For starters, these veggies contain lots of the B-complex vitamins, which are needed to make serotonin, a mood-boosting chemical. They are also loaded with antioxidants.

Spinach alone contains at least 13 different flavonoid compounds that have both antioxidant and anti-cancer properties.⁵ Romaine lettuce, meanwhile, is rich in vitamin C and beta-carotene that work together to prevent the oxidation of cholesterol, a process that can lead to heart attack or stroke.

Green leafy vegetables are also excellent for heart health. One study by researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health found that eating eight or more servings of fruits and vegetables, especially green leafy vegetables, a day resulted in a more than 20 percent reduced risk of coronary heart disease compared to eating less than three.⁶

Another study also found that antioxidants in green leafy vegetables help protect heart rate flexibility and therefore reduce your risk of heart disease.⁷ This is important as decreased flexibility in heart rate, such as can occur during exposure to air pollution, can trigger heart problems.

Leafy greens like spinach, turnip greens and romaine lettuce are also excellent sources of lutein, a carotenoid antioxidant that protects against cataracts and macular degeneration, two of the most common age-related eye disorders in the United States.

3. Onions, Garlic and Leeks

These members of the Allium family of vegetables have a pungent odor for a very good reason. The sulfur-containing compounds, including allicin and diallyl disulphide (DADS), that give onions and garlic their characteristic odors are also very beneficial for your heart.

These compounds help to relax and enlarge blood vessels, which lowers blood pressure and improves blood flow. Regularly eating garlic has also been found to benefit blood pressure, triglyceride levels, and cholesterol levels.⁸

Garlic and onions also contain compounds that help reduce inflammation in your body, which has been linked to heart disease and other chronic illness. In fact, because of its protective effect against inflammation, garlic and onions, especially in their fresh form, may help reduce the pain associated with osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, while protecting against asthma attacks.⁹

Further, allicin in garlic and onions is both antibacterial and antiviral, and studies have shown it is helpful at fighting off colds, flu, stomach viruses and Candida yeast.¹⁰

4. Avocados

Avocados have gotten a bad reputation because of their relatively high fat content, but remember that not all fat is bad for you. Avocados are rich in oleic acid, a monounsaturated fat that may help lower your bad “LDL” cholesterol, raise your good “HDL” cholesterol and offer protection against breast cancer.

They’re also a rich source of folate, which can help lower your risk of heart disease and stroke, and the carotenoid lutein, which has beneficial properties for your eyes, heart and brain.

As an added benefit, adding avocado to your salad or salsa will help to increase your body’s absorption of healthy fat-soluble carotenoids in other vegetables. For instance, adding avocado to your salad increases your absorption of beta-carotene by more than 15 times and your absorption of lutein by 5 times, compared to a salad without avocado.¹¹

5. Mushrooms

Though not technically a vegetable (mushrooms are a fungus), mushrooms deserve a spot on this functional foods list because they are excellent sources of protein, fiber, vitamin C, B vitamins, calcium, antioxidants and minerals. They also offer medicinal properties that lower your risk of cancer, reduce inflammation, boost immune function and support your body’s detoxification processes.

For instance, a compound called lentinan in shiitake mushrooms supports your immune system and can battle flu and other viruses better than some prescription drugs.¹²

Certain mushrooms, such as maitake, also contain beta-glucans, which stimulate your immune system and may help fight breast, prostate, lung, liver and brain cancers.

Even the commonly consumed portabella, crimini and white button mushrooms are rich sources of the antioxidant ergothioneine, which provides cellular protection within the human body.¹³

6. Sweet Potatoes

Unlike white potatoes, which can cause spikes to your blood sugar level, sweet potatoes actually help stabilize blood sugar levels and even lower insulin resistance. For this reason they’re often referred to as an “anti-diabetic” vegetable.

Sweet potatoes are also loaded anti-inflammatory properties, making them useful for inflammatory conditions, such as asthma, osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. They even contain unique root storage proteins that have potent antioxidant effects, which likely add to their healing potential.¹⁴

Healthy Veggies for a Healthy Life

As Hippocrates said, “Let thy food be thy medicine and thy medicine shall be thy food.” By making smart dietary choices, your foods can work for you ... helping to protect, revive and even restore your health.

And don’t feel limited by the list above. These are excellent suggestions for those of you looking for a starting point of some of the healthiest veggies to focus on, but there are many more out there, each with its own unique set of potential benefits.

So if you adore asparagus, red peppers, celery and cucumbers, don't despair because they're not on this list. Variety truly is the spice of life, and the more veggies you incorporate into your family's diet, the better off you'll be.

Related Articles:

[The Declining Nutrition of Fruits and Vegetables](#)

[Farmers' Market: A Better Way to Eat Local and Healthy](#)

[Preserving the Nutritional Value of Your Fruits and Vegetables: It's All in the Preparation](#)

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