

Superfoods: The Next Frontier

Had it up to here with broccoli? Join the club. But it's hard to take it off the menu when it's such a great source of vitamins and minerals.

Still, is a little variety too much to ask? Not anymore, thanks to research that's shifting the spotlight to a new generation of health-boosting foods -- many of which do double or triple duty to help prevent illness. Here are six on the brink of superstar status.

1. POMEGRANATE: If you're going to have a martini, at least make it a pomegranate one. This fall fruit has higher antioxidant activity than red wine and green tea, which may be why a number of studies show it may prevent skin cancer and kill breast and prostate cancer cells. It also helps:

Fight Alzheimer's disease: Researchers at Loma Linda University found that mice who drank pomegranate juice experienced 50 percent less brain degeneration than animals that consumed only sugar water. The pomegranate drinkers also did better in mazes and tests as they aged.

Guard your arteries: A group of diabetics who drank about 2 ounces of pomegranate juice a day for 3 months kept their bodies from absorbing bad cholesterol into their immune system cells (a major contributing factor to hardened arteries), discovered Israeli researchers.

2. KIWIFRUIT: Don't judge this fruit by its cover: Under that bristly brown peel you'll find a bright green star bursting with antioxidants and full of fiber. Kiwifruit works to:

Protect against free radical damage: A study from Rutgers University compared the 27 most popular fruits and determined that kiwifruit was the most nutritionally dense. Plus, it makes the short list of fruits with substantial amounts of vitamin E, and contains more vision-saving lutein than any other fruit or vegetable, except for corn.

Lower blood-clot risk: In a 2004 study from the University of Oslo in Norway, participants who ate two or three kiwis for 28 days significantly reduced their potential to form a clot. They also got a bonus benefit: Their triglycerides, a blood fat linked to heart attack, dropped by 15 percent.

3. BARLEY: When some whole grains, such as wheat and oats, are processed, they lose their fiber content. Not so with barley, which is full of soluble beta-glucan fiber in its whole kernel or refined flour form. Studies show this particular fiber may:

Knock down bad cholesterol: by as much as 17.4 percent, according to USDA research. A 2004 study found that adults with moderately high cholesterol levels who went on a low-fat American Heart Association diet began to see an improvement only when barley was added to the menu.

Decrease blood sugar and insulin levels: That makes barley a better choice for people with type 2 diabetes, says a 2005 Agricultural Research Services study.

4. CRANBERRY: This born-and-bred American berry is among the top 10 antioxidant-rich foods, making it a potent cancer protector. You know it helps treat urinary tract infection, and perhaps you heard it prevents gum disease, too, but did you know that these beneficial berries may:

Eradicate E. coli: Compounds in the juice can actually alter antibiotic-resistant strains, making it impossible for the harmful bacteria to trigger an infection. A small pilot study from Harvard Medical School and Rutgers University found that eating about 1/3 cup of dried cranberries yielded the same effect.

Help prevent strokes: Research on pigs with a genetic predisposition to atherosclerosis -- narrow, hardened arteries that may lead to heart attack and stroke -- found that those fed dried cranberries or juice every day had healthier, more flexible blood vessels.

5. BROCCOLI SPROUTS: Yes, we've been through this -- broccoli, good. The news: Broccoli sprouts are even better. At a mere 3 days old, they contain at least 20 times as much of disease-fighting sulforaphane glucosinolate (SGS) as their elders; SGS has been shown to:

Kill tumors: The chemical triggers enzymes in the body that either kill cancer cells or keep them from growing. Just 1 ounce of sprouts has as much SGS as 1 1/4 pounds of broccoli. That'll save you lots of chewing.

Protect your heart: People who ate about a half cup a day of sprouts lowered their total cholesterol by an average of 15 points, and women in the study raised their good cholesterol by 8 points -- in just 1 week, found a Japanese pilot study.

Save your sight: Exposure to UV sunlight over time may lead to an eye condition called macular degeneration, which is the number one cause of blindness in US seniors. Researchers at Johns Hopkins determined that broccoli sprouts can protect retinal cells from ultraviolet light damage.

6. KEFIR: This cultured milk drink stacks up in calcium -- one 8-ounce serving contains 30 percent of the recommended daily intake -- and contains more beneficial bacteria than yogurt. It may also:

Reduce food allergies: Baby mice fed kefir had a threefold reduction in the amount of an antibody linked to food allergies, say researchers at an agricultural university.

Battle breast cancer: Women age 50 and older who consumed fermented milk products had a lower risk than those who ate little or none.

Avoid triggering lactose intolerance: Kefir contains lactase, the enzyme that people with lactose intolerance are missing, say researchers at Ohio State University. And the taste? Like plain yogurt, just a little thinner.