

## Superfoods! Can they deliver?

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Want to stave off premature aging?

Consider adding pomegranates to your diet. They're rich in antioxidants that combat the nasty free radicals said to be responsible for everything from Alzheimer's to cancer and heart disease.

Need an energy kick? Make like Popeye and nosh on some spinach, which is said to have stress-relieving properties as well.

Feel like living to the age of 100 or beyond? Improve your chances by downing some kefir, which will also give you a fat-burning immune system boost.

Billed as "superfoods," these nutrient-rich supplements don't come in the format of a bottle of pills, a potion or lotion, but rather as a whole food or drink you could find at many grocery stores.

And they seem to be attracting a lot of interest in recent years for two basic reasons. First, scientists are getting better at telling us what foods do and what they don't. Second, as the population ages, more of us are taking an interest in what we are putting into our mouths and what impact that may have on our bodies.

Cynthia Mannion, an assistant professor at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Nursing who specializes in nutrition and health, says the superfood concept has been around for awhile. "About 25 years ago, a book came out on how to feed your child to make it a superbaby," she notes. "You see the idea discussed in nutrition literature, in the media, in films like *Supersize Me* and *Superman*.

When it's a cultural trend, everything else seems to follow, including our diets."

The interest in superfoods appeared to reach a new level with appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show of nutrition-savvy physicians like Nicholas Perricone and Stephen Pratt, both of whom have written extensive volumes on the subject.

The question, then, is what to make of superfoods: Do they deliver, or are they overhyped? The answer? It depends. Nutritionists are naturally wary of marketing strategies that seem to suggest one specific food can cure all that ails you. For example, although studies have shown that the prevention



of oxidative damage to cells has a link to disease prevention, we still don't know which antioxidants, and in what quantity or combination, are best for us, says Mannion. In other words, the pomegranate does not come with a guarantee.

They also warn against unproven claims. Wendy Shah is a registered dietitian with the Calgary Health Region's Diabetes, Hypertension and Cholesterol Centre. She estimates that she gets at least one question a day about fad foods, from bee pollen to coconut oil to the juice of the bitter melon.

It's rare that any of these products have enough background evidence for her to start actively recommending them to people, she says. "My guess is that people who see results are doing more than just drinking the juice of the bitter melon – they're likely making an effort to increase their activity, eat more carefully and take other proactive measures to curb the problem they're trying to fix," says Shah.

Still, there is no denying that it is better to pay attention to what you eat and to eat as healthy as you can – so long as you don't get carried away by the hype or buy into benefits that have not been proven by science, says Shah.

Most people see loading up on pomegranates to be a better, more natural alternative to taking bottled pills – and they're right. But while a shot of acai juice is better for you than a slurpee from your local convenience store, that doesn't mean the solution to your health problems is as simple and direct as throwing back half a cup of this or a spoonful of that.

The bottom line: "Don't count on any one food product or supplement to be a miracle cure or a quick fix, and don't get stuck on any food to the exclusion of others. Enjoy a good mix of healthy foods in your diet," advises Shah.

The good news is that most proponents of superfoods agree. For Dr. Stephen Pratt, author of *SuperFoods Rx: Fourteen Foods That Will Change Your Life*, the definition of a superfood is one that is readily available, part of a sound diet, commonly eaten in the Americas and around the world, and supported with plenty of evidence to show they are rich in nutrients associated with longevity and good health.

"These are timeless foods that have been used for centuries, not new ones that have never been eaten before," says Dr. Pratt, a senior staff ophthalmologist at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, California, who also works as an assistant clinical professor at the University of California at San Diego. "Eating these foods was generally good advice 5,000 years ago, it continues to be good advice now and will remain for the next 5,000 years as well. We are genetically prime for eating these foods – we developed while eating them and so they have become essential to our genetic makeup."

While Dr. Pratt says there are about 130 or 140 different superfoods that fit this definition, the 14 he mentions in his book, including walnuts, blueberries and beans, are said to be the best in class. For example, blueberries are said to have more antioxidants and other valuable compounds than any other berries in their category. But that doesn't mean you should boycott raspberries or boysenberries, as some foods not identified as the best still have trace minerals and different forms of antioxidants you may not get otherwise. The idea of superfoods is to widen people's food choices in a healthy diet, while keeping what anti-aging expert Dr. Nicholas Perricone calls the "pleasure factor." While the nutrients in superfoods can act in a therapeutic manner, decreasing the risk of diseases and enhancing overall health, people don't eat nutrients – they eat food. Thus, it has to taste good, too.

So for breakfast, Dr. Perricone has whole grains, fruit and unflavoured kefir milk with a little pomegranate concentrate mixed into it – “tastes just like a strawberry sundae,” he says – and for dinner, a piece of wild salmon cooked with garlic and served with a side of lentils. Foods often taste good because of the essential fats they contain – which in the past people have been misinformed about and warned to stay away from. Some dietary fats are an important part of his healthy diet, including nuts, olive oils and avocados.

Dr. Perricone, a best-selling author, dermatologist and professor at Michigan State University, is also a staunch advocate of gardening your own vegetables whenever possible, and using natural fertilizers and pesticides. “Some foods are not as nutritious as they once were as they are not always grown in adequately rich soils and good sources of sunlight,” he says. “Buying organic is also important, especially when it comes to meat and dairy products.”

Regardless of how good a food may be for you, portion size is something to be conscious of every time we put something into our mouths, says Mannion.

“It doesn't matter if it's whole grains or if it's a fruit smoothie,” she says. “The great thing about nuts is that they are high in fatty acids and antioxidants, but the not-so-great thing is that they are calorically dense. A cup a day will pack on weight, so you want to have seven or eight nuts as a snack – not as a meal, and one teaspoon of peanut butter on a celery stalk, not two tablespoons.”

According to Mannion, a nutrition expert who freely admits to peering into other people's grocery baskets to see what they are eating, superfoods include water (“it should be the first thing we reach for in the morning”) and the egg (“it's versatile, easy to cook, protein-packed, and it comes in a perfectly-sized portion”).

And as far as fruits and vegetables go, generally speaking, the deeper the colour of the fruits and vegetables, the more nutrients they pack. There are exceptions. Mannion's favourite veggie? Beans – high in fibre, low in calories and dense in nutrients, they make for healthy spreads, soups and salads.

But before you grab a shopping cart and make a beeline to the shelves, be wary of less-than-healthy variations of the superfood, cautions Shah.

Back when a natural ingredient in unsweetened cranberry juice was first proven to be helpful in clearing up bladder infections, marketers jumped on the bandwagon and pushed it into being a fad. A plethora of highly sweetened cranberry-grape, cranberry-cherry and other high-sugar cocktail variations of this juice then hit grocery shelves.

“Food companies diluted the health benefits of drinking the juice in the first place, and posed additional problems for those with diabetes and those with weight problems,” says Shah. Even if you are eating and drinking all the right foods in the appropriate portion sizes, that's not all you have to do to achieve optimal health. “You still need a healthy lifestyle that includes regular physical activity and a good night's sleep,” says Dawn Peacock, a registered dietitian for Women's Health Resources at the Calgary Health Region. “A bowl of blueberries alone will not cancel the effects of a bag of chips and an unhealthy lifestyle.

But the good thing about superfoods is that you can now look at what's on your plate from the perspective of ‘What can you do for me?’

Barbara Balfour is a communications advisor with the Calgary Health Region. This article originally appeared in the November 2006 issue of Apple.

## SUPERFOODS

Here is a partial list of some superfoods, along with a brief description of what makes them special. For more information about superfoods, consult the books listed at the bottom of this page.



### Potent pomegranate

Behold the pomegranate. Many health experts consider this fruit to be one of the leading superfoods because it is rich in antioxidants that combat the nasty free radicals said to be responsible for everything from Alzheimer's to cancer and heart disease.

### Hot peppers

Both bell and chili peppers contain antioxidants, have twice the Vitamin C as citrus fruit and work as great fat burners. 2



### Garlic, onions, leeks

These vegetables can help the liver eliminate toxins and carcinogens. 2

### Walnuts

Rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, a natural source of melatonin. Helps reduce the severity of degenerative diseases, including cardiovascular disease, according to one study. Good source of protein. 1

### Acai fruit

A berry from an Amazon palm tree, acai has been called the No. 1 superfood on the planet. Acai has 10 to 30 times more antioxidants than blueberries, green tea, red grapes or red wine. The pulp is packed with essential omegas and has similar protein to an egg.2



### Beans & lentils

These help reduce cholesterol while beefing up on antioxidants, folic acid and potassium. These foods are high in calcium, a nutrient-dense source of vegetable protein, and high in fibre. 2. Good source of protein and fibre; helps reduce risk of heart disease. 1

### Blueberries



Powerful antioxidants containing folic acid, vitamin C, carotenoids, and hundreds of other useful compounds, including flavonoids. Their thick skin and seeds provide valuable fibre. Blueberries are said to help prevent macular degeneration in the eyes and also act as an anti-inflammatory. 1

## Tomatoes

Full of nutrients, including lycopene, which supports the immune system and helps ward off prostate cancer. 1

## Pumpkin

Good source of vitamin A; supports eyesight and healthy skin. 1

1. Source: SuperFoods Rx: Fourteen Foods That Will Change Your Life by Dr. Stephen Pratt and Kathy Matthews.

2. Source: The Perricone Promise by Dr. Nicholas Perricone