

Superfoods – Behind the Claims

You've heard the hype. The latest "it" superfood dramatically reduces your risk of cancer, improves memory or promotes weight loss. The internet buzzes with endorsements. Celebrities sing its praises. Juice bars puree it into pricey smoothies. A food powerhouse is born.

On the flip side are the foods that the media claim you must avoid, from white sugar and bad fats to gluten and carbs. The list of food villains goes on and on.

But what's in a name? And what does it mean for my own health? And how's the average person to make sense of all the labels, fads and latest news headlines.

What makes a superfood so super?

By nature, some foods do provide more vitamins, minerals or healthy fats than others. Many also contain non-nutritive compounds that may have health benefits. These foods often become part of the superfood category.

You practically have to be a food chemist to understand the superfood lexicon. Common terms include:

- **Phytochemicals** are beneficial compounds in plants. Some estimate that there may be as many as 4,000 different phytochemicals.
- **Antioxidants** may protect your cells against damage from unstable molecules called free radicals.
- **Polyphenols** are a type of antioxidant.
- **Flavonoids** are a type of polyphenol.

While superfoods may not be miracle cures, they usually are healthy foods that should be included in a well-balanced diet.

The early days of superfoods

To begin, there are no standard criteria for defining a superfood. There's no government-approved list. Health claims for superfoods are more about marketing than science. The term "superfood" began



appearing about 20 years ago. In nutrition jargon it became "nutraceutical" or "functional food." Some of the first foods to be called superfoods were soy products, green tea, the entire cabbage family and any food that was purple or blue. All were acclaimed as powerful fighters of chronic disease. Later, exotic additions like Chinese goji berries or Amazonian camu camu joined the superfood lineup.

What the experts say

Regarding cancer, researchers have not been able to confirm the cancer-fighting potential of some of the superfoods. Dr. Walter Willett, chair of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, has said, "That's not to say there's no benefit from fruits and vegetables, but the benefit is probably very small and limited to certain foods and certain cancers." One thing we know for sure is that a diet with a variety of fruits and vegetables is good for your health.

Regarding the effects on heart disease and stroke, they're part of a much bigger picture. Dr. Penny Kris-Etherton, professor of nutrition at The Pennsylvania State University, has written, "The truth is that many so-called 'super' foods are good for your heart and your overall health when incorporated into a heart-healthy diet."

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The overall diet matters

In the U.S., the top six sources of calories are:

- Burgers
- Sandwiches
- Tacos
- Desserts
- Sweet snacks
- Sugar-sweetened beverages.

Between the calories, unhealthy fats and abundant sugar, it's not a health-promoting bunch. There are nutrient gaps too. The diet is short on fiber and some important vitamins and minerals. It would take more than a daily cupful of blueberries or other so-called superfoods to fix this nutritional nightmare.

Most of us consume enough calories. Yet many still don't get enough of the potassium, fiber, calcium and vitamin D, and other key nutrients found in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and milk. In addition, many fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds provide plant chemicals that may play a part in preventing some chronic diseases such as heart disease.

The American Heart Association recommends nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day, about 4½ cups. All varieties of fruits and vegetables count — they don't all have to be the super ones.

More food label claims

Health claims on food labels don't stop at "superfood." Some claims are legitimate. Others may be overstated. Let's look at some common ones:

Natural can be confusing. On packaged foods, it's a marketing term. It usually describes products that don't contain artificial or synthetic ingredients. The term does not refer to nutritional or health benefits.

For meats, the USDA regulates the "natural" label. It means that no additives or preservatives were added after the meat or poultry was processed. "Naturally raised" means the animal was not given antibiotics, growth hormones or animal by-products when it was being raised.

Gluten-free: People with celiac disease or gluten intolerance look for the gluten-free label for foods that won't make them sick. The gluten-free label is voluntary. It is strictly regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Probiotics are live micro-organisms that may promote digestive health. Most consumers have seen yogurt labeled "contains probiotics" or "contains live cultures." The claim is showing up on other food products, everything from pickles to juice to cereal. There's evidence that some probiotics are helpful in preventing diarrhea caused by infections and antibiotics and in improving symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome.

Summary

It's not easy being a consumer who's interested in good food and good health. It's hard to sort out the serious health claims from the marketing labels. The so-called superfoods are good for you, especially when they're part of a healthy diet that's rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and lean meats and dairy. Be wary of food claims that sound too good to be true.

Sources

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