

Food for thought – Superfoods: how many do you have in your kitchen?

Chia seeds, goji berries, wheatgrass, white tea... the list seems to get longer every week as another 'superfood' hits the headlines. You may want to try them, for a bit of variety, and you may find that you spend quite a bit of money on them.

There's no single ingredient to guarantee good health but the best advice is to consume a healthy diet comprising a range of foods and providing lots of beneficial nutrients without too many calories, saturated fats, salt and added sugars.

Some less exotic everyday foods fit the bill, some may have even more antioxidants than the superfoods and many may already be in your fridge, freezer or cupboard.

Eggs are a complete source of protein (they have all the essential amino acids); they contain omega-3 fats, antioxidants, choline (required for fat metabolism), vitamin B12 and iodine (important for thyroid function). In addition, they contain vitamin D and selenium (for bone health and immune function respectively). The high protein content helps you to feel fuller for longer and consequently people who eat eggs for breakfast or lunch tend to consume fewer calories for the rest of the day.

Salmon and other oily fish are good sources of complete protein, iodine and zinc (zinc is also needed for a healthy immune system). They are some of the richest sources of omega-3 fats (specifically EPA and DHA) which are associated with reduced risk of heart disease and lower levels of circulating (bad) triglycerides. Tinned fish is generally good but tuna loses its omega-3 fats during the canning process so it's not such a good choice unless eaten fresh.

Milk and yoghurt, low fat versions, are low calorie and nutrient-rich. They contain complete protein, B vitamins, calcium, zinc and magnesium. Calcium is essential for bone development in children and for maintaining bone density in adults. Milk also contains phosphorus, which is good for teeth. Lower fat milk and yoghurt have the ideal balance of carbohydrate and protein for post-exercise recovery. Pre- and pro- biotic yoghurts contain starches and beneficial bacteria that support gut health.

Tomatoes and tomato products provide vitamin C, fibre and potassium but they are best known as excellent sources of the antioxidant lycopene. Lycopene is associated with a reduced risk of prostate cancer and may help to reduce inflammation. Unusually, processed tomato products such as tinned tomatoes, juice or puree/paste contain even higher amounts of lycopene than the fresh tomatoes and cooking them with olive oil may increase the amount of lycopene that the body can absorb. Bring on the tomato-based sauces and toppings for pasta and pizza!

Nuts have a great combination of healthy fats (including omega-3), protein, fibre, vitamin E, minerals and antioxidants. Specific nuts have higher levels of certain nutrients: eat almonds for vitamin E, walnuts for omega-3 fats, Brazil nuts for selenium.

Blueberries (and other berries e.g. strawberries and raspberries) have very high levels of antioxidants, compared to other fresh fruits and vegetables. Antioxidants are important in protecting the body's cells from damage by free radicals. Free radicals originate from environmental factors such as pollution and smoke but they are also released in the body in response to stress and to exercise. By protecting against cell damage, antioxidants reduce the risk of heart disease and some cancers. Berries also contain vitamin C, folate (for

neurological health) and fibre (for gut health).

Spinach and broccoli provide beta-carotene (which is converted to vitamin A in the body), vitamins C and E, folate and fibre. In addition, they are rich sources of two specific antioxidants that help to protect our eyes as we get older. Brassicas in general (the group also includes cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, turnips and swede) contain a compound that has been implicated in fighting cancer cells; this effect has been seen in laboratory studies.

Oats contain beta-glucan which helps to reduce the absorption of cholesterol. They are low GI (except for the highly processed quick-cook variety) and, like all wholegrain cereals, they also contain fibre, vitamins and minerals.

Beans and lentils are low GI, low fat and high fibre. They also contain protein, minerals and vitamins. They have a high iron content, however if you are a vegetarian and reliant on this source of iron, you need to be aware that it is not well absorbed; include some meat (if you can) and vitamin C with your meal to improve the absorption of iron from the pulses.

Fruit, vegetables, low-fat dairy, eggs, poultry, fish, pulses, nuts, seeds and wholegrains are all nutrient-rich and low in saturated fat, salt and added sugars; they are the superfoods that are probably already in your kitchen.

How much of these foods should you eat? You really need to look at your diet overall to answer this question but the guidelines are as follow: you can eat eggs every day; aim for two portions of oily fish per week; at least 3 portions of milk / yoghurt per day (200ml milk or 150g pot of yogurt is a portion); 80g of tomatoes, berries, broccoli or pulses counts as one of your 5-a-day fruit and vegetables; a portion of nuts per day (30g, a small handful) is probably enough as that will be around 200kcal; a small bowl of porridge provides one of the three to five recommended (in USA) servings a day of fibre.

Here are just a few recipe ideas for these everyday superfoods: scrambled eggs or omelette, hard boiled eggs as a snack or with salad, tinned fish in tomato sauce spread on wholegrain toast, yoghurt with fruit and/or nuts, bananas and custard made with skimmed milk (and a pinch of mixed spice), fruit salads and crumbles, spinach in salads and savoury dishes, and don't forget pulses in Mexican, Indian, Moroccan and Middle Eastern dishes.

Mary Russell

Sports Nutritionist