

## 'Superfoods' Everyone Needs

Experts say more than a dozen easy-to-find 'superfoods' can do wonders for your health.

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WebMD Feature

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It's a bird ... it's a plane ... it's ... walnuts? Don't laugh. The humble walnut, along with a dozen other dietary choices -- from beans to yogurt -- is no less than a "superfood," say some health experts.

Steven Pratt, MD, is one of them. In his book *SuperFoods RX: Fourteen Foods That Will Change Your Life*, he goes into detail why he thinks these foods are so potent.

Pratt, an ophthalmologist who specializes in ocular plastic surgery at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., says he became convinced of the power of these basic foods when he saw the positive results of a few simple diet changes in his patients suffering from age-related macular degeneration -- a leading cause of blindness.

"Whether you're trying to prevent cataracts, macular degeneration, cancer, or cardiovascular disease, the same type of preventive dietary measures apply," he says. "The whole body is connected: a healthy heart equals a healthy eye and healthy skin. You'll hear about all these special diets for special health needs, but really, the same diet and the same lifestyle choices prevent the same diseases. With rare exceptions, you don't need 20 different preventive modalities -- just one really good diet."

And that "one really good diet," Pratt says, should be founded on these "superfoods":

- Beans
- Blueberries
- Broccoli
- Oats
- Oranges
- Pumpkin
- Salmon
- Soy
- Spinach
- Tea (green or black)
- Tomatoes
- Turkey
- Walnuts
- Yogurt

When incorporated into your regular daily diet, these foods, says Pratt, can stop some of the changes that lead to diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, Alzheimer's, and some cancers. "I picked them out after researching all of the world's healthiest diets: for example, Japanese diets, Mediterranean diets, and even some of the healthier dietary patterns in the United States," he says. "I noticed that it's the same food groups wherever you live."

### **Walnuts: The Good Fat**

Every nut, even macadamias -- the fattiest -- has been found to improve cholesterol, Pratt reports. "Walnuts are among the superstars. They're an excellent source of plant-based omega-3 fatty acids," he says. Salmon is another great source of these heart-healthy fatty acids.

"Studies show that you can lower your risk of cardiovascular disease by 15% to 50% if you eat a handful of nuts five times a week. If you found a pill that did the same thing, you'd make a fortune." Of course, chowing down on a huge tub of walnuts can be counterproductive, so as always, watch your intake. A handful of dry, roasted, unsalted walnuts -- about 14 walnut halves -- has about 150 calories, and is enough to yield "superfood" benefits.

Add Some Color to Your Diet

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It is true that good things come in small packages. Used by Native Americans for medicinal purposes, blueberries are a tiny fruit that combines a wide variety of nutrients. "Blueberries don't have a huge amount of any single nutrient, but they have the synergy of multiple nutrients," Pratt says. "There's vitamin C, folic acid, fiber, carotenoids, and hundreds of other compounds in this one small fruit. Blueberries also have a very thick skin, which is where nature packs most of its nutrients."

When you're thinking "superfoods," think color, says Beverly Clevidence, PhD, a research leader at the USDA's Diet and Human Performance laboratory. That means foods that are deep blue, purple, red, green, or orange. They contain health-enhancing nutrients that protect against heart disease and cancer, and also improve our sense of balance, our memory, and other thinking skills.

Nutritionist Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RD, director of nutrition of the WebMD Weight Loss Clinic, offers these tips on how to add some color to your diet:

- Top your cereal with almonds or berries; add tomatoes to sandwiches, soups or stews; layer your whole grain bread sandwich with slices of peppers and fresh spinach.
- Pack a snack bag of nuts, baby carrots, raw broccoli, grape tomatoes, and bell pepper slices for a nutritious pick-me-up between meals.
- Fruit and nut granola bars stash easily into briefcases for quick energy and a tasty treat.

### **Soy for Cholesterol**

"No, adding soy to your diet does not mean pouring more soy sauce on your Chinese food," says Leslie Bonci, MPH, RD, LDN, director of sports nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. It does mean adding soy foods such as tofu, soy milk, soy nuts, or the green soybeans -- called edamame by the Japanese.

Not everyone is convinced about soy's heart-healthy benefits but its cholesterol-lowering benefits do seem powerful enough. A study reported July 2003 in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that a diet of soy fiber, protein from oats and barley, almonds, and margarine from plant sterols lowered cholesterol as much as statins, the most widely prescribed cholesterol medicine.

Tofu takes on the flavor of foods that it is cooked with, says Zelman. Try a stir-fry of colorful veggies and cubed tofu with a light Asian sauce for a quick meal. You can also find cereals at the store loaded with both soy and fiber. Serve with skim milk and you'll get three super nutrients for breakfast.

Take a soy protein bar for a quick snack or lunch during the day. Soy nuts are another great portable snack option.

Edamame (Japanese name for green soybeans) are snacks even kids will love! Find these nutritious nuggets in the freezer section at your supermarket. Serve them plain or with a low-fat dip.

## Fiber for Your Whole Body

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Beans and oats are great sources of fiber. Fiber helps keep our cholesterol and blood sugar levels low and our bowels functioning smoothly.

Studies show that dietary fiber -- including foods such as apples, barley, beans and other legumes, fruits and vegetables, oatmeal, oat bran and brown rice -- clearly lower blood cholesterol. High-fiber foods are also digested more slowly, so they don't cause spikes in blood sugar levels like white bread, potatoes and sweets do. Of course, everyone knows that fiber helps keep you regular. High-fiber foods also help us feel full, making it easier to control weight.

Read food labels to find whole grain breads and cereals that provide three or more grams of fiber per serving, says Zelman. A bowl full of bran or high-fiber cereal is a great start. Whole fruits and veggies are great for a healthy dose of fiber. Aim for five to nine servings of fruits and veggies a day for a healthy dose of fiber. Juices don't contain as much fiber as whole fruit. And beans are loaded with fiber and protein, so add them to soups, stews, salads, eggs, and salsas.

### **Calcium for Your Bones**

Yogurt and other dairy products help keep your bones strong and lessen your chance of fractures as you get older, calcium also keeps teeth strong, helps your muscles contract, and your heart beat. Recent studies have even shown that calcium may lower your risk of colon polyps, and help you lose weight. Researchers at Purdue University found that women who consume calcium from low-fat dairy products, or get at least 1,000 milligrams a day, showed an overall decrease in body weight.

Dairy products are the best source of calcium. Choose skim milk, low-fat yogurt, and low-fat cheese to avoid saturated fats. A single serving can provide you with 20% of the 1,200 milligrams a day you need. You can also add calcium to your diet with calcium-enriched cereals and orange juice. Foods such as dark green vegetables, dried beans, and sardines also contain calcium.

Start your day with café au lait made with half skim milk and half strong coffee, says Zelman. Add a bowl of whole grain cereal topped with skim milk and fresh fruit for a breakfast of champions. Snack on low-fat yogurt or cheese between meals for an energizing treat.

Another plus for the "superfoods": they can all be found in pretty much every supermarket in every town in America. You might not be able to buy bok choy everywhere, but every grocery store sells broccoli. Both dark green leafy vegetables with similar health benefits, broccoli makes the "superfood" list and bok choy is one of its "sidekicks."

So are "superfoods" for real, or just another diet-book gimmick in a market flooded with them? "I think it's a good message," says Beth Kitchin, MS, RD, assistant professor in the department of nutrition at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. "There's good data to support the health benefits of all these foods. They're what we might call 'functional foods,' because you eat them for a very specific purpose. The walnuts

and the salmon are a great source of omega-3 fatty acids, yogurt is a great source of calcium and natural bacterial cultures that help maintain a healthy digestive tract, and tea has been shown over and over again to have a role in preventing some cancers."

Can you lose weight on a "superfoods" diet? Of course you can, says Pratt, although that's a side benefit. "The Superfoods way of looking at things is a lifestyle choice, not a weight-loss program," he says. "But if you make these foods a lifestyle choice, you'll feel better and you'll look better."

With reporting by Carol Sorgen

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SOURCES: Steven G. Pratt, MD, Scripps Memorial Hospital, La Jolla, Calif. Beth Kitchin, MS, RD, University of Alabama, Birmingham. Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RD, director of nutrition, WebMD Weight Loss Clinic. WebMD Feature: "Foods for Long Life and Well-Being."

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