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Experts Urge Less Focus On Antioxidants, More On Variety

Tired of trying to keep track of all the so-called superfoods you're supposed to eat?

You know, oregano that packs 42 times more antioxidants than apples, cooked tomatoes that may prevent prostate cancer, and chocolate and wine that may or may not be health foods?

Then here's the good news -- you can stop trying.

Leading researchers say all those breathless headlines, food packaging claims and seemingly contradictory studies about what antioxidants can and can't do have fostered a faulty silver bullet mind-set that can hinder health more than help.

Instead, experts advise focusing on balance, moderation and variety, and leaving the phytochemicals, flavanols and phenolic acids to scientists.

Researcher Jeffrey Blumberg acknowledges that "doesn't seem to be a very sexy message. People would rather be told there is a superfood, a term I hate because in fact there is no such thing."

Foods labeled as antioxidant-rich -- everything from bottled tea to bags of frozen berries -- have become a \$526 million industry that continues to grow.

Even foods that otherwise have seen sales slump are getting a boost from antioxidant claims, says Phil Lempert, a food industry analyst and editor of SupermarketGuru.com. Sales of blueberry preserves, for example, are up, though overall jam sales are down.

"It's clear that regardless of whether or not people understand what 'rich in antioxidants' means, it is certainly a logo or a stamp that says 'Buy me! I'm going to help you live forever,'" Lempert says.

Maybe. Maybe not. Experts aren't suggesting antioxidants aren't important or that people shouldn't

eat foods that contain them. Instead, they're saying not enough is known about how they work to justify focusing one's diet on any particular antioxidant or food.

It's all about quashing free radicals, harmful chemicals produced by the body and found in the environment that damage cells. That damage has been linked to a host of chronic conditions, from heart problems to cancer, even aging.



Diets rich in antioxidants -- which are in countless foods -- seem to minimize this damage. What's not clear is whether that benefit is due to the antioxidants themselves or to the overall diet and the way the antioxidants and other nutrients in it interact.

The evidence increasingly suggests the latter, says Howard Sesso, a professor of medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. That means eating patterns make a difference, but probably not eating particular foods or taking supplements.

Diets rich in beta carotene, for example, have been found to help prevent heart disease and cancer, but studies of beta carotene supplements alone have been mostly disappointing. And there is little evidence that one antioxidant is better than another.

Also unknown is whether quantity counts. Manufacturers brag about the amount of antioxidants in their products, but studies have yet to establish that more is better, or whether the body can even absorb the amounts contained in most foods.

Blumberg, a scientist at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition, worries that the hype about antioxidants creates a false sense of security. Eating a daily handful of almonds -- believed good for heart health -- won't make up for a diet otherwise laden with saturated fat and cholesterol.

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December 27-29, 2005

Harvest Blend Regular

- Artichokes
- Carrots
- Celery
- Red Onions
- Tomatoes
- Cucumbers
- Spinach
- Romaine Lettuce
- Jonagold Apples
- Navel Oranges
- Bananas
- Satsuma Mandarins
- Cascade Pears

See the web site for details on our other options. Produce bag contents are subject to change based on availability.

You Don't Say

"Artichokes are just plain annoying. After all the trouble you go to, you get about as much actual 'food' out of eating an artichoke as you would from licking 30 or 40 postage stamps. Have the shrimp cocktail instead." - Miss Piggy

"When men reach their sixties and retire, they go to pieces. Women go right on cooking." - Gail Sheehy

"I like a cook who smiles out loud when he tastes his own work. Let God worry about your modesty; I want to see your enthusiasm." - Robert Farrar Capon

"A boy doesn't have to go to war to be a hero; he can say he doesn't like pie when he sees there isn't enough to go around." - E. W. Howe

"Everybody's a pacifist between wars. It's like being a vegetarian between meals." - Colman McCarthy

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So how should people work antioxidants into their diets? Think big picture.

Healthy diets are like healthy investment portfolios -- diversified, says John Erdman Jr., a professor of internal medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Eating a variety of produce and whole grains ensures the best mix of all nutrients.

There's probably not much harm in eating a lot of blueberries, but that can't be said of all antioxidant-rich foods. The calories in fruit juice and alcohol, for example, add up quickly and obesity negates the benefits of even the healthiest foods.

Even people trying to address specific health problems would do better to eat a broad mix of foods than to tailor their diets around certain ingredi-

ents, the experts say.

"When people get prostate cancer, all of the sudden they make all the changes in their diet," Erdman says. "We don't even know if those changes make a difference then. But we know that if people eat that diet before getting cancer, you don't tend to get it."

Consumers also must be critical of companies' health claims about antioxidants, many of which are unregulated and unsupported by science. And studies often are funded by the industries that benefit when products are dubbed superfoods.

Bottom line -- eat a balanced diet and don't get hung up on the particulars.

Recipes

Spinach and Mushroom Stuffed Chicken Breasts

- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, 6 ounces each
- large plastic food storage bags or waxed paper
- 1 bunch chopped spinach
- 2 tbsp butter
- 10 oz. button mushroom caps
- 2 cloves garlic, cracked
- 1 small shallot, quartered
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 cup part skim ricotta cheese
- 1/2 cup grated parmigiano or romano, a couple of handfuls
- 1/2 tsp fresh grated or ground nutmeg
- 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil



Sauce:

- 2 tbsp butter
- 2 tbsp flour
- 1/2 cup white wine
- 1 cup chicken broth

Place breasts in the center of a plastic food storage bag or 2 large sheets of waxed paper. Pound out the chicken from the center of the bag outward using a heavy-bottomed skillet or mallet. Be firm but controlled with your strokes. Chop and transfer spinach to a kitchen towel. Twist towel around spinach and wring it out until very dry. Transfer to a medium-mixing bowl.

Place a nonstick skillet over moderate heat. When skillet is hot, add butter, mushrooms, garlic and shallot. Season with salt and pepper and saute 5 minutes. Transfer mushrooms, garlic and shallot to the food processor. Pulse to grind the mushrooms and transfer to the mixing bowl, adding the processed mushrooms to the spinach. Add ricotta and grated cheese to the bowl and the nutmeg. Stir to combine the stuffing. Return your skillet to the stove over medium high heat.

Place a mound of stuffing on each breast and wrap and roll breast over the stuffing. Secure breasts with toothpicks. Add 3 tbsp oil to the pan, 3 turns of the pan. Add breasts to the pan and brown on all sides, cooking chicken 10 to 12 minutes. The meat will cook quickly because it is thin. Remove breasts; add butter to the pan and flour. Cook butter and flour for a minute, whisk in wine and reduce another minute. Whisk in broth and return breasts to the pan. Reduce heat and simmer until ready to serve. Remove toothpicks. Serve breasts whole or, remove from pan, slice on an angle and fan out on dinner plates. Top stuffed chicken breasts or sliced stuffed breasts with generous spoonfuls of the sauce.

Spinach and Artichoke Bread Pudding

- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 bunch spinach, cooked and chopped
- 2 cups chopped yellow onions
- 1 tbsp roughly chopped garlic
- 1 tbsp plus 2 tsp Italian seasoning
- 2 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 1/4 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 2 artichoke hearts
- 6 large eggs
- 3 cups heavy cream
- 2 cups milk
- 2 tbsp fresh lemon juice
- 12 to 14 cups cubed (1-inch) day-old French bread (about 1 loaf)
- 1 pound Brie, rind removed and cut into 1/2-inch cubes, optional
- 1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan
- 1/4 cup minced fresh parsley leaves



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Grease a 9 by 13-inch baking dish with 1 tbsp olive oil.

Bring a medium pot of water to a boil. Add the spinach and cook until just wilted, about 30 seconds. Drain and rinse with cold water. Once cool, squeeze as much water from spinach as possible then roughly chop and reserve.

Heat 1 tbsp olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onions and cook until golden brown and tender, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic, 2 tsp of Italian seasoning, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper, and cook, stirring, until the garlic is fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the artichokes and cook, stirring, another 2 minutes. Remove from the heat and reserve.

Combine the eggs, cream, milk, lemon juice, remaining 1 tbsp Italian seasoning, remaining 2 tsp salt, and remaining 1 teaspoon pepper in a large bowl. Whisk to combine. Add the bread, spinach, artichoke mixture, brie, 1/4 cup Parmesan, and parsley and stir to combine. If bread does not absorb all of liquid immediately then let rest until this happens, about 20 minutes.

Pour the bread pudding mixture into the prepared dish. Sprinkle remaining 1/4 cup Parmesan over the top and drizzle with remaining 2 tbsps olive oil. Bake until firm in the center and golden brown, about 1 hour. Serve warm.