

The Best Antioxidant-Rich Foods for a Disease-Fighting Diet

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Antioxidants may well be our most potent defense against disease. Antioxidants help our bodies fight toxins and free radicals—molecules that damage DNA and can eventually lead to health problems such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's and macular degeneration. Though we naturally produce antioxidants and fight free radicals, the process isn't completely effective, and its effectiveness declines with age.

By eating a wide range of antioxidant-rich foods, we can give our bodies a helping hand. Research on taking antioxidant supplements has yielded a variety of results—for example, some studies suggest that supplemental doses of beta-carotene or vitamin E actually increase health risks. The best way to get a good, healthy mix of antioxidants is through a rich and varied diet. Fortunately, many delicious foods offer a high dose of disease-fighting antioxidants. Incorporate these foods into your diet for better health.

Berries: Among nature's richest sources of antioxidants are berries. Berries' antioxidants include vitamin C and flavonoids, the chemicals that give fruits their color and may help reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and memory loss. Generally, the darker the berry, the stronger the disease-fighting properties. For an antioxidant-boosting smoothie, blend frozen organic berries with unsweetened cranberry or pomegranate juice instead of dairy, which can decrease their potency.

Legumes: Small red beans topped the list of more than 100 antioxidant-rich foods in a study published in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*. In fact, three of the top five foods were beans. Colorful varieties such as red, black, pinto and kidney contain the most flavonoids. Add them to soups, casseroles and salads. Opt for dried beans over canned—most food cans are lined with the potentially dangerous chemical bisphenol A (BPA). When you soak or cook beans, some of the flavonoids leach into the water. Reuse this nutritious liquid as a vegetarian stock in soups and stews.

Fruits: An apple a day does help keep the doctor away. To get the most antioxidant bang for your bite, choose organic Red Delicious, Granny Smith or Gala varieties and eat the peel, which contains quercetin and rutinose, strong antioxidants that may help combat inflammation, cell damage and blood circulation problems. Orange-colored fruits such as navel oranges, mangoes, peaches and tangerines are also good antioxidant sources, as are dried fruits—prunes in particular.

Vegetables: Dark leafy greens such as spinach, kale and red leaf lettuce are excellent choices; artichokes, asparagus and red potatoes also provide antioxidant benefits. Researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) found that some vegetables' antioxidant level actually increases when they're slightly cooked. For example, the total ORAC (Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity—the standard measure of antioxidant activity) for cooked red cabbage is 3,145, while raw red cabbage is 2,496. Other veggies that benefit from slight cooking include yellow onions, broccoli and tomatoes.

Beverages: Drink up! Green and black teas are rich in catechins, a type of flavonoid that may help prevent blood clots, block allergic response, slow the growth of tumors, protect against Parkinson's disease and even delay the onset of diabetes. And the antioxidant resveratrol, found in red wine, may have anti-inflammatory properties that lower the risk of heart disease and strokes. Coffee and many fruit juices also have high amounts of antioxidants.

Nuts: Walnuts, pistachios, pecans, hazelnuts and almonds are antioxidant-rich foods and great sources of the antioxidant vitamin E, which may have the ability to lower cholesterol, reduce heart disease risk and promote healthy, youthful skin. One study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* found eating almonds with a meal decreases after-meal surges in blood sugar—good news for those with (or at risk of developing) Type 2 diabetes. Add nuts to salads, baked goods and oatmeal. Sprinkle finely chopped roasted nuts on top of sautéed veggies and pasta.

Herbs & Spices: Ounce for ounce, many herbs have more antioxidant power than fruits and vegetables. When researchers at the USDA put 39 herbs to the test, three types of oregano—Mexican, Italian and Greek mountain—scored highest in antioxidant activity. Ground cloves, cinnamon and ginger are also good sources, and they make nice additions to mulled wine or cider.

Grains: Whole grains provide a wide range of nutrients including bran, fiber and antioxidant substances called polyphenols that may lower cholesterol and the risk of cancer. A large, five-year study of nearly half a million people found that eating more whole grains offers protection against colorectal cancer. Hulled barley, brown or wild rice, buckwheat, whole-grain cornmeal, millet, oats, quinoa, and whole-wheat bread and pasta are excellent options.

Dark chocolate: According to the Mayo Clinic, dark chocolate has as many or more antioxidants than most fruits and vegetables. A Swedish study found that women who regularly ate dark chocolate lowered their risk of stroke by 20 percent. The consumption of dark chocolate has also been found to reduce blood pressure, lower insulin resistance and prevent blood clots. But keep in mind that dark chocolate contains caffeine and high levels of sugars and fat, so it should still be eaten in moderation.