

Foods that Heal

Your diet CAN enhance your health



by Jessica Viscomi

It's no secret that fruits and vegetables are good for you, but did you know that many foods contain potent medicines? "We think of food as something that nourishes us, pleases us, and keeps us alive," writes Annemarie Colbin in *Food and Healing*. "But good doctors and healers throughout history have known that just as food continually builds our body, so it can alter it."

A number of studies have documented the numerous ill effects of poor diet on the body. However, science is also indicating that a proper diet can positively influence your health and prevent illness. The kitchen may very well become another pharmacy.

For example, Dean Ornish, M.D., demonstrated that diet (and lifestyle changes) can reverse heart disease. His study involved 48 people with moderate to severe coronary heart disease (a condition in which the coronary arteries narrow due to fatty material buildup). Study participants were randomized to participate in an intensive lifestyle change group, or a usual-care control group. The intensive lifestyle change group ate a 10 percent fat, whole foods, vegetarian diet. They also made other lifestyle changes, such as exercising more frequently and participating in support groups, for five years. They did not take any cholesterol-lowering drugs.

In the lifestyle change group, coronary artery disease regressed. However, in the control group, coronary artery disease continued to progress, and more than twice as many cardiac complications occurred (*JAMA* 280[23], Dec. 1998). This strongly suggests that diet may measurably improve health, and even change the course of disease.

Not all vegetables have the same nutritional value and health benefits, reports author and natural health professor Marcus Laux, N.D. Some provide more benefits than others. The following foods have been shown to support and heal the body in a number of ways:

Garlic

Garlic is one of the most widely researched herbs in the world, and has been used as a remedy throughout history. It contains alliin, a compound that has antimicrobial, cholesterol-lowering, and other beneficial effects, states the *Physician's Desk Reference for Herbal Medicines, Second Edition (PDR)*. Garlic may:

- **Serve as an antibiotic, antifungal, and antiviral agent.** Fresh garlic juice has been demonstrated to be an equally powerful antifungal to prescription drugs amphotericin and nystatin, write Eugene Zampieron,

COMPLIMENTS OF



N.D., A.H.G., and Ellen Kamhi, Ph.D., R.N., in *The Natural Medicine Chest*.

- **Aid digestion.** Garlic stimulates digestion by increasing the flow of gastric juices and the rate of bowel movements, according to the *New Encyclopedia of Common Diseases*.
- **Lower cholesterol and promote heart health.** A double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled study examined 46 people with high cholesterol who were not compliant with drug therapy. Each person was given dietary counseling to lower fat intake and enteric-coated garlic powder tablets or a placebo. After 12 weeks, the garlic group experienced a significant reduction in total cholesterol and LDL ("bad")

BENEFITS OF EATING ORGANIC FOODS

Natural farming methods are used to grow organic foods. That means these foods are free of pesticides and other additives.

Organic foods are gaining popularity because people are becoming more aware of the harmful effects of hormones, antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides, and preservatives. They are also questioning the safety of irradiated and genetically modified foods.

The Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concur that the agricultural use of antibiotics strongly contributes to antibiotic resistance among bacteria in food. The source and quality of the food you eat is an important issue that deserves careful attention. For more information on organic foods, refer to the *Kids and Pesticides Health Report* and *Eating Safely*.

cholesterol, compared with the placebo group, who didn't experience any significant changes (*J Am Coll Nutr* 20[3], Jun 2001). Garlic has also been shown to reduce stickiness of blood platelets (which can lead to poor circulation and blood vessel obstruction when coupled with high cholesterol levels) and to slightly reduce mild high blood pressure, according to Donald J. Brown, N.D., in *Herbal Prescriptions for Better Health*.

- **Fight cancer.** Garlic may inhibit the development of cancer and cancer-causing substances, and stimulate the immune system, notes Patrick Quillin, Ph.D., R.N., C.N.S. In one study, a combination of garlic extract and garlic powder inhibited human tumor cell growth outside the body (*Phytomedicine* 6[1], Mar 1999).

Onions

Onions exhibit many medicinal properties similar to their relative, garlic. They are rich in sulfur compounds called thiosulfates, which are reported to have potent anti-inflammatory effects, as well as vitamin C and quercetin, a powerful antioxidant, writes Mark Stengler, N.D., in *The Natural Physician's Healing Therapies*. Onions may:

- **Lower blood pressure.** In one German study, each day for a period of one week, 24 patients with high blood pressure received either four capsules of an onion-olive oil product, or a placebo. The onion-olive oil product significantly decreased systolic blood pressure, and there was also a trend towards a decrease in diastolic blood pressure. All effects were shown immediately and after one week's administration (*Arzneimitt* 51[2], Feb 2001).
- **Lower cholesterol and blood sugar.** In one study, diabetic rats were fed 3 percent onion powder or 15mg capsaicin (the active ingredient in chili peppers) for eight weeks. The onion-

fed rats experienced an improvement in their diabetic condition, probably due to onion's blood sugar-lowering and cholesterol-lowering effects, researchers theorized. In contrast, the capsaicin group experienced no changes (*Mol Cell Biochem* 175[1-2], Oct 1997).

- **Relieve asthma.** Test tube studies have demonstrated that thiosulfates and other compounds derived from onions inhibit inflammation-causing enzymes associated with the asthmatic response (*Prostaglandins Leukot Essent Fatty Acids*. 39[1], Jan 1990).
- **Protect against cancer.** Onions have been reported to protect against several different types of cancers, including that of the stomach, colon, and breast. One French study of 345 women found that the risk of breast cancer decreased as they ate more fiber, garlic, and onions (*Eur J Epidemiol* 14[8], Dec 1998).

Cruciferous vegetables

Cruciferous vegetables include broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, bok choy, collard and mustard greens, kale, kohlrabi, rutabaga, and turnips. Besides having vitamin C and fiber, they also contain phytochemicals that decrease the damage of cancer-causing chemicals (http://www.nutrition-guide.net/cruciferous_vegetables.html). The two most widely researched phytochemicals in cruciferous vegetables are diindolylmethane, or DIM, and indole-3 carbinol, or I3C. When you chew cruciferous vegetables, plant enzymes are released and then exposed to stomach acid. This forms I3C, which later yields DIM, explains Dr. Laux. These phytochemicals may:

- **Fight cancer.** DIM supplementation promotes healthy estrogen metabolism and restores a normal hormonal balance. How does this help protect against cancer? Estrogen provides many critical health benefits for both men and

women, but excessive or prolonged exposure may increase the risk of cancer for both sexes. For instance, women with higher levels of estrogen in their blood have a higher incidence of breast cancer.

Additionally, studies have shown that DIM directly inhibits cancer cell growth (*Carcinogenesis* 19, 1998; *Biochem Pharmacol* 58, 1999). Studies have also demonstrated that I3C inhibits the growth of prostate cancer cells, breast cancer cells, colon cancer cells, and cervical cancer cells in vitro.

Bioflavonoids

Bioflavonoids are responsible for the pigment in fruits and flowers. They are some of the most powerful antioxidants in nature, says Dr. Brown. They are plentiful in apples, onions, green tea, cherries, bilberries, and blueberries, as well as hawthorn, ginkgo, and milk thistle. Bioflavonoids may:

- **Lower the risk of heart disease.** Consuming a high amount of bioflavonoids in the diet is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, according to Dr. Brown.
- **Fight cancer.** In one recent animal study, the bioflavonoid quercetin inhibited pancreatic cancer cell growth in mice (*Int J Cancer* 98[5], Apr 2002).
- **Relieve allergies.** Bioflavonoids appear to directly control the factors involved in inflammation and allergies, write Michael T. Murray, N.D., and Joseph Pizzorno, N.D., in the *Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine*. Quercetin, considered the most active of the bioflavonoids, prevents histamine release and has a strong anti-inflammatory, antiallergy effect, according to Dr. Stengler.
- **Promote eye health.** Blueberry extract is rich in bioflavonoids called anthocyanocides. These are used to reduce nearsightedness, diabetic retinopathy (retinal damage caused by diabetes), and improve night vision, report Drs. Murray and Pizzorno. The bioflavonoid quercetin

CAN'T GET ENOUGH FRUITS AND VEGGIES?

The "Five a Day for Better Health" national campaign was initiated by the National Cancer Institute, the National Institutes of Health, and the Produce for Better Health Foundation. Its purpose is to encourage people to increase their daily consumption of fruits and vegetables to at least five per day. If you lack enthusiasm for broccoli and Brussels sprouts, or if you can't seem to get enough, these supplements can help. However, remember that supplements cannot replace a healthy, balanced diet.

- **Beta carotene** is an antioxidant, immune strengthening, and anticarcinogenic carotenoid, according to Michael T. Murray, N.D., in the *Encyclopedia of Nutritional Supplements*.
- **Lutein**, a carotenoid found in spinach and dark green leafy vegetables, may protect against macular degeneration, a group of disorders that affect the retina, writes Mark Stengler, N.D., in *The Natural Physician's Healing Therapies*.
- **Lycopene**, a carotenoid found in tomatoes, has double the antioxidant activity of beta carotene. It may be a significant protector against cancer, reports Dr. Murray.
- **Vitamin C**, an important antioxidant and immunity booster, is found in citrus fruits, peppers, and dark green leafy vegetables. It is manufactured in the bodies of most mammals. However, humans need to get it from their diet or in supplement form, notes Dr. Stengler.
- **B vitamins** include thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, pyridoxine, cobalamin, folic acid, and biotin. They are found in whole grains, legumes, and cruciferous vegetables, as well as meats and poultry. B vitamins are often referred to as "stress vitamins," due to their ability to help the body cope with stress and improve energy levels. They are also used to prevent birth defects, cancer, and heart disease, according to Dr. Stengler.
- **Dietary fiber** is plentiful in fruits, vegetables, legumes, and bran. It reduces the amount of time it takes for food to pass through the intestinal tract, increases the amount of healthy bacteria in the intestines, and also increases a feeling of fullness in the stomach, reports Dr. Murray.

also inhibits an enzyme involved in the formation of diabetic cataracts (*Altern Med Rev* 6[2], Apr 2001).

- **Fight viruses.** Bioflavonoids, coupled with vitamin C, are important to immune function, according to Drs. Murray and Pizzorno. A Chinese study demonstrated that two bioflavonoid compounds isolated from the root of the *Limonium sinense* plant inhibited the replication of the Herpes Simplex Virus Type-1 (the type of herpes usually associated with the mouth, lips, and face) better than acyclovir, a

commonly prescribed herpes drug. (*Planta Med* 66[4], May 2000).

Carotenoids

Carotenoids are plant pigments found in green leafy vegetables, yams, sweet potatoes, and carrots. They are perhaps the most important dietary antioxidants, according to Drs. Murray and Pizzorno. One of the most well-known carotenoids is beta carotene, which is converted to vitamin A within the body. Carotenoids may:

- **Fight cancer.** Beta carotene enhances the cancer-fighting activity of the body's natural killer cells, reports Dr. Quillin.

Several studies have shown that high levels of beta carotene are correlated with lowered risk of cancer, according to James Gordon, M.D., in *Comprehensive Cancer Care*. Another carotenoid that has made headlines lately is lycopene, which is found in tomatoes and may lower the risk of prostate cancer (*Cancer Res* 15;59[6], Mar 1999).

- **Protect against sunburns.** One study investigated the effects of administering natural carotenoid supplements to 22 fair-skinned people with 1cm² patches of UV-induced sunburn for six months. Researchers concluded that the minimum of UV exposure needed to produce a sunburn increased significantly, and that natural carotenoids may partially protect skin from UVA and UVB-induced skin damage (*Proc Soc Exper Biol Med* 223, 2000).

Mushrooms

While some mushrooms are poisonous, others are delicious to eat and provide several health benefits. Mushrooms are rich in polysaccharides, large carbohydrate molecules that directly affect the immune system, write Drs. Zampieron and Kamhi. Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*), maitake (*Grifola frondosa*), and shiitake (*Lentinus*

edodes) mushrooms have been revered as energy-enhancing, balancing medicines throughout Asian history. Presently, they are the focus of ongoing research. These mushrooms may:

- **Enhance immunity.** Maitake extracts may be promising immune system stimulators, according to one review (*Altern Med Rev* 6[1], Feb 2001). This possibility is being studied for several conditions, including cancer and HIV. Additionally, a reishi polysaccharide has demonstrated the ability to stimulate white blood cells, which are instrumental in fighting infection (*Abstract of the 1994 Symposium on Ganoderma Research*, Beijing Medical University).
- **Protect against cancer.** Beta-D-glucan (a polysaccharide found in maitake) was found to kill prostate cancer cells in one study at the Department of Urology at New York Medical College (*Mol Urol* 4[1], Spring 2000).
- **Lower blood sugar.** One recent study found that maitake mushrooms may lower blood sugar in people with diabetes, a condition which is marked by high blood sugar (*Diabet Med* 18[12], Dec 2001).

- **Lower cholesterol.** Scientists have isolated eritadenine, a shiitake derivative that may help prevent heart attacks by lowering cholesterol (*J Nutr* 125[8], 1995). In an animal study, maitake, shiitake, and another mushroom called enokitake (*Flammulina velutipes*) lowered total cholesterol levels in rats (*Exp Biol Med* 226[8], Sept 2001).

Food for thought

Hippocrates taught that food should be our medicine and medicine should be our food. Ancient systems of medicine relied heavily on certain foods to heal. Now science is beginning to confirm the medicinal properties of many fruits, herbs, vegetables, and fungi. However, do not attempt to self-treat any conditions with food without consulting your healthcare practitioner first.

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