

These 10 nutrient-packed provisions can help us stay healthy and fit

The 32nd Street Farmers' Market in Baltimore opened last Saturday morning with four produce farmers unloading batches of fresh blueberries for sale. Two and a half hours later, the berries were gone - undoubtedly scooped up by patrons who covet not only the seasonal fruit's sweet taste and variety of uses, but its abundance of health benefits.

In fact, blueberries routinely make lists of nutrient-packed victuals commonly known as super foods. They are among the most important blocks in the food pyramid: vegetables, fruits, meats, beverages and dairy products that have helped popularize such terms as Omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants and beta carotene. As the nation becomes more conscious about health and nutrition, super foods are in high demand because they play vital roles in keeping the body fit and preventing sickness.

While some of the super foods are new to American palates, many of the foods have been known for their nutritional benefits for a long time. Their newfound popularity underscores how product marketers are in step with health-conscious adults - particularly baby boomers - who helped spearhead nutrition labeling for all food packaging and trans fat reduction in restaurant cuisine.

"Because of our emerging science, we know that a balanced diet is important, and certain aspects are more important with the kind of diseases we're dealing with these days," said Kathleen Zelman, director of nutrition for Internet health source WebMD

The reasons why some foods are singled out is because of the nutrients they possess," Zelman added. "To say that blueberries are at the top of the heap for berries is not to suggest strawberries are not nutritious, but blueberries are higher in antioxidants."

Some super foods, like green, leafy vegetables, have been diet staples for years and a longtime favorite at the 32nd Street Farmers' Market.

"Most of the greens have been popular because they are inexpensive, so people of all economic backgrounds can afford them. And they have lots of iron and vitamins, so they're healthy at the same time," said Marc Rey, president of the farmers' market board of the 32nd Street Farmers' Market.

In recent years, he says, blueberries and cherries, another super food, have become quite popular. "They have a fairly limited season," said Rey, "and they go with so many things in the summer - fruits, salads and in baking."

Zelman says many super foods like blueberries are popular because they allow you to enjoy health benefits without skimping on taste. They're not alone: Super food lists widely vary, but here's a list of 10 that show up on many nutritionists' lists and on various Web sites.

Acai: The dark purple berry is a super food growing in popularity, even though most people don't know how to pronounce it (ah-sigh-ee). The fruit is grown in the Amazon rain forest and packed with twice the antioxidants of blueberries, as well as lots of vitamins, minerals, amino acids and fiber. Acai improves digestive function, promotes sound sleep, strengthens the immune system, is thought to fight cancer cells and even enhances sexual desire and performance.

Salmon: Know the old adage about fish being "brain food?" Whether wild or farmed, salmon gives credence to the adage. In addition to being high in protein, it is rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, which play a crucial role in brain function, normal growth and development. Salmon is among the few widely available sources of the fatty acids EPA (helpful in treating inflammatory autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis) and DHA (a natural boost for children's minds and bodies).

Swiss chard: Bitter like beets and salty like spinach, this multicolored leafy vegetable is chock full of vitamins K (promotes bone health), A (preserves and improves eyesight) and C (may lower cancer risk), while also being a quality source of manganese (maintains normal blood sugar levels), iron (promotes energy) and dietary fiber. One cup is about 35 calories.

Cherries: They're popular for topping off an ice-cream sundae, but the sweet, tasty red fruit stands alone as a nutritional juggernaut. Antioxidant-loaded cherries may help combat rheumatoid arthritis and are loaded with anthocyanins, a pigment that not only gives the cherry its red color but has anti-inflammatory properties and may reduce heart-disease risk. Cherries are said to fight gout and are among the few food sources of melatonin, an antioxidant that promotes sleep. They are now offered in an all-natural, not-from-concentrate juice called Cherry Pharm that packs the equivalent of 50 cherries in an 8-ounce bottle. Used by the National Hockey League

New York Rangers for muscle repair, it is sold only online outside of New Jersey.

Green tea: If fish is the "brain food," then green tea is the "brain drink." It contains high levels of antioxidants called polyphenols, a group of chemical substances said to be key in fighting oxidative stress, which causes neurodegenerative diseases and some cardiovascular diseases. Green tea helps protect brain cells against Alzheimer's disease, controls flatulence, regulates body temperature and helps heal wounds.

Walnuts: The clumpy-shaped nut has one of the highest antioxidant levels of any tree fruit, meaning it helps to improve your cardiovascular system. It also has high levels of Omega-3 fatty acids, which help cognitive function while stemming the effects of rheumatoid arthritis.

Blueberries: One of the most popular super foods, blueberries are a fruit long enjoyed for their flavor and low caloric value; now they are also coveted for their nutritional benefits. In addition to being low in sodium, fiber rich and full of vitamin C, blueberries are high in antioxidant phytonutrients that neutralize the effects of cataracts, glaucoma, hemorrhoids and peptic ulcers.

Kefir: Similar to yogurt, kefir is a cultured, enzyme-rich food that has beneficial bacteria, vitamins, minerals, calcium and amino acids. Kefir helps regulate the nervous system while promoting bowel movement, reducing flatulence and boosting energy. For many parents, it has become a popular ingredient for kids' smoothies.

Brown rice: White rice begins as this whole grain; the process of converting it from brown to white depletes it of many vitamins and nutrients. That's why the brown version is much healthier; it is rich in such minerals as selenium (may reduce colon-cancer risk) and is a quality source of fiber and essential fatty acids. Brown rice may also help lower risk of joint inflammation, as well as lower LDL (so-called "bad") cholesterol.

Ground flax seed: Often sprinkled on cereal and salads (though it can also be used in baking), flax seed is rich in lignan, an antioxidant that may play a role in fighting such diseases as breast cancer and diabetes. It is also high in omega-3 fatty acids and has been shown to lower LDL cholesterol.

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