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The Top 10 Antioxidant Foods

by Lisa Turner
Better Nutrition, Jan. 2002

Natural Protection

We've known for years that antioxidants can help prevent heart disease and cancer, reduce blood pressure and slow the effects of aging. These naturally occurring compounds protect the body from harmful, excess free radicals, sweeping them up before they can cause damage. And the best way to lay an antioxidant-rich foundation that's inhospitable to toxins and free radicals is through a combination of whole foods.

BERRIES

Few fruits have quite the provocative allure, the fragile charm or the nutrients of berries. They're full of fiber, minerals and vitamins, and loaded with healing antioxidants. Blueberries, raspberries and blackberries are rich in proanthocyanidins, antioxidants that can help prevent cancer and heart disease. Strawberries, raspberries and blackberries contain ellagic acid, a plant compound that combats carcinogens. Blueberries also appear to delay the onset of age-related loss of cognitive function.

Quick Tips: Stir raspberries into vanilla yogurt, add whole blueberries to salads, or dress up sliced strawberries with a little honey, balsamic vinegar and black pepper.

BROCCOLI

Maybe you never listened when Mom said, "Eat your broccoli." So listen now. Broccoli and other cruciferous vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts, can help prevent cancer and ward off heart disease. Cruciferous vegetables contain a compound called indole-3-carbinol (I3C - a potent antioxidant that breaks down estrogen in the body) that reduces the risk of breast cancer and other estrogen-sensitive cancers, like cancer of the ovaries and cervix. Other studies have shown that broccoli can help fight cervical dysplasia, a precancerous condition. Broccoli also contains other protective constituents like beta-carotene, which can help prevent cancer and heart disease.

Quick Tips: Wrap cooked, chilled broccoli with roasted pepper strips, or toss steamed broccoli with olive oil, chopped black olives and crushed red pepper flakes.

TOMATOES

Tomatoes are fast becoming one of our favorite modern foods, and for good reason -- they can ward off certain kinds of cancer, prevent macular degeneration and cataracts, and help maintain mental function as we age. Tomatoes contain lycopene, a relatively rare member of the carotenoid family, also found in pink grapefruit and twice as powerful as beta-carotene. Studies have shown that men who eat more tomatoes or tomato sauce have significantly lower rates of prostate cancer. Other studies suggest lycopene can help prevent lung, colon and breast cancers. Tomatoes also contain the antioxidant glutathione, which helps boost immune function. Note: cooked tomatoes are preferable, since heat allows more desirable antioxidants in tomatoes to be made available to the body. And because lycopene is fat-soluble, eating tomatoes with oil can improve absorption.

Quick Tips: Add minced sundried tomatoes to mashed potatoes, or toss Roma tomatoes with chopped fresh basil and olive oil and serve over pasta.

RED GRAPES

A little red wine can keep your heart beating longer and stronger. Why? Mostly because of substances called resveratrol and quercetin found in red grapes. These potent antioxidants boost heart health by acting as free-radical scavengers, reducing platelet aggregation and helping blood vessels remain open and flexible. Resveratrol can also protect against cancer and reduce the risk of inflammatory diseases, gastric ulcers, stroke and even osteoporosis.

Quick Tips: Snack on frozen red grapes for a sweet treat, or heat organic red wine with cinnamon sticks and a few whole cloves.

GARLIC

The "stinking rose," perhaps the world's oldest known medicinal and culinary herb, is packed with antioxidants that can help fend off cancer, heart disease and the effects of aging. The sulfur compounds that give garlic its pungent odor are thought to be responsible for its healing benefits. Studies have shown that garlic keeps the heart healthy by lowering cholesterol levels, reducing blood pressure, fighting free radicals and keeping blood from clotting. Other studies suggest that eating garlic regularly can help prevent cancer. It also has potent anti-fungal properties and can help treat asthma and yeast infections.

Quick Tips: Roast whole heads of garlic until soft, and spread on warm baguette slices or puree roasted peppers with garlic for a fast sauce.

SPINACH

Popeye may have thought eating spinach gave him strength, but it also allowed him to hit a nutritional jackpot. Because lutein (an antioxidant found in spinach) is the main pigment in the macula - the region of maximum visual sensitivity - it can help protect your vision. Studies have shown that people who eat spinach are less likely to develop cataracts and macular degeneration, the two most common causes of vision loss. Lutein appears to work by shielding the retina from sun damage and fighting free radicals that can harm the eyes. Some preliminary studies have suggested that lutein can also help prevent heart disease.

Quick Tips: Stir chopped, fresh spinach and crushed walnuts into steamed brown rice, or lightly wilt baby spinach leaves and toss with olive oil.

TEA

The most frequently consumed beverage in the world may also be one of the best ways to prevent a number of degenerative diseases. Tea has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke and other diseases. It was originally thought that green tea had more antioxidants than black tea, but recent studies suggest that they are equally beneficial. The catechins in green tea are oxidized in the manufacturing process of black tea, forming free-radical fighting theaflavins.

Quick Tips: Poach salmon in an infusion of green tea and ginger. Or boil soba noodles in green tea and toss with sesame seeds and a dash of toasted sesame oil.

CARROTS

Carrots are loaded with a potent antioxidant called beta-carotene, a member of the healing family of carotenoids. Also found in beets, sweet potatoes and other yellow-orange vegetables, beta-carotene provides protection against: cancer, especially lung, bladder, breast, esophageal and stomach cancers; heart disease, and the progression of arthritis by as much as 70 percent. Note: Cooked carrots have considerably higher levels of antioxidants than uncooked, probably because heat breaks down the active compounds and makes them more available.

Quick Tips: Puree cooked carrots with low-fat chicken broth, rosemary and a dash of cream, or steam whole baby carrots and toss with nutmeg, honey and a little butter.

SOY

The enduring favorite of health-foods aficionados, soy can help prevent cancer, lower cholesterol, ward off osteoporosis and lessen the effects of menopause. Most of the health benefits of soy have been attributed to its content of Genistein and other isoflavones, which resemble natural estrogens in the body. Studies have shown that Genistein can help prevent breast, colon and prostate cancers. Additionally, soy can reduce both overall cholesterol levels and LDL (low-density lipoprotein or "bad") cholesterol levels, without affecting the levels of beneficial HDL. Soy can also prevent osteoporosis and help alleviate the symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes.

Quick Tips: Add cubed tempeh to pasta sauce, spread soy butter on a whole-wheat pita instead of peanut butter or toss soy sprouts on a salad or in stir-fry dishes.

WHOLE GRAINS

Your morning bowl of cereal may be a more potent source of phytochemicals than you think -- as long as it's whole-grain variety. Vitamin E in grains is a potent antioxidant that plays a role in preventing cancer, especially prostate cancer. Other studies have found that it can boost immunity, slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease, treat and possibly prevent arthritis, prevent sunburn and treat male infertility. Grains are also rich in phytic acid, known as IP-6, a potent antioxidant that can help protect against breast, colon and liver cancers.

Quick Tips: Combine cooked bulgur wheat with chopped parsley, scallions and olive oil, or add raisins, dried apricots and minced basil to brown rice.

To help prevent cervical cancer, antioxidants are a must

[Better Nutrition](#), [June, 1996](#) by [Victoria Dolby](#)

The link between diet and cancer is clear, however, researchers are still sorting out the individual relationships between specific nutrients and cancers of various organs. Currently, the most promising research direction is the study of antioxidants in the prevention of cancer.

Much of the evidence equating antioxidants with "anti-cancer" relies on studies showing that people eating diets high in antioxidant-rich foods are less likely to develop cancer. For example, the Iowa Women's Health Study found that women dishing up plenty of fruits and veggies (prime sources of antioxidant nutrients) have about half the risk of lung cancer.

Cervical cancer is among the most common cancers afflicting women, and it appears to be on the rise. The basis of the increasing incidence of this cancer has been a matter of debate. Many scientists believe that diligent use of annual Pap smears tends to identify a greater number of women with the precancerous condition called cervical dysplasia, a state in which abnormal cells start growing in the cervix.

The good news? The early identification of women at risk for cervical cancer results in earlier treatment and a reduction in the number of women facing more serious and deadly forms of cervical cancer.

The role of nutrition in cancer of the cervix and cervical dysplasia has been investigated for quite some time. For more than a decade, scientists have consistently demonstrated that a low intake of the B vitamin, folic acid, contributes to precancerous cervical conditions. And skimping on vitamin C, vitamin E, or beta-carotene may increase the risk tenfold of developing cervical dysplasia.

Spurred by the body of evidence implicating antioxidants in cervical cancer, Dr. Prabhudas R. Palan and his colleagues at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York decided to analyze the effects of vitamin A, three carotenoids -- betacarotene, lycopene, and canthaxanthin -- and two forms of vitamin E -- alpha- and gamma-tocopherol -- in precancerous and cancerous conditions of the cervix.

Blood levels of the vitamins were measured in 140 women who received abnormal Pap smears suggestive of cervical cancer and in 95 healthy women. A laboratory, unaware of which samples came from a woman with cancer and which came from a cancer-free woman, analyzed the blood samples.

According to the report of Dr. Palan's study in *Clinical Cancer Research*, the women at high risk for developing cervical cancer or diagnosed with cervical cancer had "...significantly decreased levels of beta-carotene, lycopene, canthaxanthin, and alpha-tocopherol compared to the controls."

Women who smoked were in the worst shape, having the lowest levels of antioxidants. For instance, smokers with cancer were found to have 66% lower beta-carotene levels compared to nonsmokers with cervical cancer.

"The present findings support an association between decreased antioxidant nutrient levels..." and cervical cancer, stated Dr. Palan, who hypothesized that the free-radical-fighting ability of these nutrients is responsible for their role in cervical cancer.

In addition, Dr. Palan suggests that these antioxidants prevent mutational changes to DNA, the basic building blocks of life, that would predispose the body to cancer.

Two questions that remain regarding antioxidants and cancer ask "Which comes first?": Does cervical cancer alter the absorption and use of the antioxidant nutrients, causing low blood levels? or Do low levels of antioxidants lead to cervical cancer? The latter seems to be true.

"The present finding of decreased antioxidant nutrient levels in asymptomatic women with [precancerous conditions of the cervix] as well as patients with invasive cervical cancer suggests that the reduction of antioxidant levels precedes the development..." of cancer.

The conclusions drawn from this study can be added to a long line of research demonstrating the importance of antioxidant nutrients in health. It seems clear that a body starved for antioxidants is vulnerable to cervical (and other forms of) cancer. But, fortunately, it's a two-way street. A high intake of antioxidant nutrients appears to be powerfully protective against cancer.

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