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ANTIOXIDANT boosters



How to
turn up
the health-
enhancing
power of
10 super-
foods

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It's a dirty job, but antioxidants do it with gusto.

These nutritional powerhouses protect us against cellular damage by scooping up the free radicals that bounce around in the body, causing oxidative stress and eventually damaging DNA.

Luckily, Mother Nature provides us with plenty of fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes. Plant foods are loaded with thousands of different kinds of antioxidants, but some foods are richer sources than others. What's more, the way you choose, store, and cook these foods can turn their antioxidant power either up or down.

Here are our top 10 picks of beneficial foods and some smart strategies to help you get a bigger antioxidant bang with every bite.

1 Cocoa

With about twice the antioxidant count of red wine and nearly three times that of green tea, cocoa powder tops the list of antioxidant-rich foods. Procyanidins and epicatechins are the main flavonoids found in cocoa. Studies show they can improve heart health by reducing blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and they may even perk up your mood.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Since most people don't eat large amounts of cocoa powder, the best way to get your antioxidant fix is to eat dark chocolate—the darker the better. Look for brands with no less than 70 percent cocoa. (The milk in milk chocolate actually reduces antioxidant content.) And when you do buy cocoa powder, choose the non-Dutch-process variety—the Dutch process, which alkalinizes the cocoa to temper its natural bitterness—destroys some of the flavonols.

2 Tart Cherries

Keeping inflammation at bay is what tart cherries do best. They're also a natural source of melatonin, an antioxidant hormone that helps regulate biorhythms and sleep patterns.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Cherry juice concentrate gives you the biggest antioxidant bang for your buck, plus it's sold year-round at grocery stores. Otherwise go for dried cherries, which are considerably higher in antioxidants than canned or frozen, but lower than juice concentrate.

3 Artichokes

This prickly favorite scores high on the antioxidant scale, thanks to the presence of cynarin and silymarin, two substances thought to lower cholesterol, protect liver cells from toxins, enhance circulation, and aid digestion. Antioxidants are found in both the leaves and the heart of the vegetable.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Boiling artichokes improves their antioxidant profile eightfold over raw; steaming them is best of all, boosting the antioxidants by a factor of 15. While preparing a whole artichoke may be a bit of a chore, even in peak season (March through May), frozen artichoke hearts are available year-round and are just as rich in antioxidants.

4 Blueberries

These sweet treats boast an antioxidant triple threat of anthocyanins (which give the berry its vivid blue hue), cholesterol-fighting pterostilbene, and epicatechins, the same substance found in cranberries that promotes urinary tract health.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Go wild! In a 2008 study, the wild blueberry beat its cultivated cousin as well as two dozen other fruits, including blackberries, strawberries, and raspberries, for antioxidant activity. Smaller, darker, and more intensely flavored than standard blueberries, wild blueberries have a short season—August through September. Fortunately, frozen and dried berries are available year-round, and their antioxidant levels are comparable to fresh.

5 Tomatoes

Tomatoes are loaded with lycopene, a powerful antioxidant responsible for this fruit's vibrant red hue. Regularly eating foods high in lycopene may reduce risk of prostate, lung, and stomach cancers, as well as heart disease and macular degeneration.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: This is one case where canned tomatoes and products, such as tomato soup, paste, sauce, and

even ketchup, are better than fresh. Cooking breaks down tomatoes' cell walls, which releases lycopene, allowing the body to absorb it. In one study, people who ate canned tomatoes absorbed as much as 2.5 times more lycopene than those eating fresh tomatoes. And since lycopene is fat-soluble, adding a bit of olive oil will boost absorption even more.

6 Kale

Like all cruciferous vegetables, kale is rich in sulforaphane, along with zeaxanthin and lutein. Sulforaphane has anticancer properties and keeps blood vessels healthy. It has also been shown to boost immune function. Zeaxanthin and lutein promote eye health.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Cooking kale increases its antioxidant score. But don't overdo it: too much heat does the opposite. Your best bet is to lightly steam until soft, but still crisp. Chopping also releases these beneficial compounds.

7 Small Red Beans

Also known as adzuki beans, these easy-to-digest legumes are filled with flavonoids, which are part of a bigger family of compounds called polyphenols. These compounds may lower your risk of heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: All it takes is a ½-cup serving to reap the benefit of beans. Since many of the antioxidants in beans are water soluble, save the water you soaked your dried beans in, and use it to cook up a bean soup or stew. Canned bean liquid adds an antioxidant boost as well; unfortunately, it's also high in sodium.

8 Açai Berry

This Amazonian food staple is particularly high in anthocyanins, which are responsible for the açai berry's deep purple color. These potent pigments battle cancer, heart disease, diabetes, inflammation, obesity, and other age-related illnesses.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Buy flash-frozen açai berry pulp (sold in the frozen fruit section), rather than juices, which are usually blended with other fruits, for the most powerful antioxidant buzz.

Choose dried beans instead of canned, and add the antioxidant-rich soaking water to homemade soups and stews.

9 Apples

Apples are packed with polyphenols, which lower "bad" LDL cholesterol levels and protect against breast, colon, liver, and digestive cancers. Of these, quercetin (also found in onions and tea) may benefit the brain and guard against Alzheimer's disease too.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Don't peel the skin. Polyphenols are five times more prevalent in the skin than in the flesh of the apple. Also, go for Red Delicious, which has a higher antioxidant rating than Granny Smith, Gala, or Fuji.

10 Pecans

The highest-scoring nuts on the antioxidant scale, pecans are rich in gamma tocopherols, a form of vitamin E that prevents cholesterol from oxidizing, effectively reducing "bad" cholesterol and increasing "good" cholesterol.

ANTIOXIDANT UPGRADE: Don't store pecans at room temperature. To prevent degradation of antioxidants (as well as flavor and texture), keep them in the refrigerator for up to nine months or the freezer for up to two years. ●

Nutrition expert and food writer Diane Weland, MS, RD, likes to get her antioxidants in dark chocolate form.

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