

Are Superfoods Really Good for You or Just Marketing Hype?

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A slew of superfoods claiming to have a myriad of health benefits are exploding, and they are altering many Americans' eating patterns.

Move over spinach. Forget broccoli rabe. Pasta is old school. There is a new wave of fruits, vegetables, and grains, dubbed superfoods, that are having their moment. Healthline sat down with several nutrition and food industry experts to get the lowdown on these superfoods. Are they really beneficial to your health?

A Punch of Antioxidants

Alissa Rumsey, R.D., C.D.N., spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics in New York City, told Healthline that superfoods — a term coined by marketers — usually have a high content of vitamins, nutrients, and antioxidants. Antioxidants are natural compounds found in foods that protect against the damaging effects of oxidation and inflammation in our bodies. "A lot of things can cause inflammation in our bodies, and cells get oxidized, which can cause many different disease states," said Rumsey. "Antioxidants help to get rid of these free radicals that happen when you have oxidation."

Food industry expert Phil Lempert, editor of supermarketguru.com, told Healthline that consumers should be cautious about superfoods: "The word 'superfoods' is on a lot of products that probably don't deserve that designation because, like the terms 'new,' 'fresh,' or 'free,' superfoods has become a buzz word."

Lempert advised consumers to read product labels and manufacturers' websites to find out why the item is being touted as a superfood. For instance, the label may say the product is high in antioxidants or contains probiotics. Even then, Lempert cautioned, "For probiotics, the manufacturer may load yogurt with a million active cultures of bacteria at the factory, but that doesn't mean when you consume these yogurts, the cultures are actually alive and able to give you any benefit. It's more of a marketing claim, which manufacturers need to step up and prove to the consumer with facts, rather than just use as a way to get people to buy."

Kale Is Trending

One of the newest superfoods gaining widespread attention is kale, a leafy green vegetable loaded with vitamin K. Anita Mirchandani, R.D., C.D.N., spokesperson for the New York State Dietetic Association in New York City, said, "We started off with spinach, went into bok choy, and then broccoli rabe. Now kale is the next best thing. There is definitely a benefit. Kale is an anti-inflammatory and it has fiber."

Many superfoods like kale are gaining popularity because of their versatility. Mirchandani explained, "There is so much functionality to these foods. You can consume them in a variety of ways. You can put kale in a juicer or sauté it with garlic for a side dish. Or you can put vinegar on kale and have it as a salad."

Quinoa Is Overtaking Pasta and Rice

Quinoa (pronounced "keen wah"), an ancient grain, is also gaining traction as a superfood. "You can sauté it and use it as a side to a meat. You can make a quinoa bowl, or a quinoa salad, instead of having greens. It's higher in protein and lower in carbohydrates than pasta," said Mirchandani.

Franci Cohen, a personal trainer and certified nutritionist in New York, also gave the thumbs-up to quinoa. Cohen told Healthline, "Quinoa provides eight grams of protein and five grams of fiber per cup. It is also a good source of iron, zinc, vitamin E, and selenium, which helps to control weight and lower your risk for heart disease and diabetes."

Amaranth, which is a very small grain, is also starting to gain attention, and it can also be used in a stir fry or sauté. "It is a good source of protein and essential amino acids, which are the essential nutrients that make protein in our body, and it is easy to cook," said Mirchandani.

Berry Nice

Many types of berries are making the superfoods list. Acai (pronounced "ah-sigh-EE") berry is a grape-like fruit harvested from acai palm trees, which are native to the rainforests of South America. Acai berry juice has surpassed pomegranate juice in its popularity, and is being sought after as a cholesterol-lowering beverage, according to Mirchandani.

You may not think of frozen fruits as superfoods. "When fresh fruits are out of season, frozen fruits, such as wild blueberries, which are smaller than regular blueberries, are very nutritious," said Rumsey. "They are picked right when they are ripe and then frozen versus getting berries that are shipped from across the country or from other countries. The nutrient content of the shipped berries may be lower than that of the frozen berries."

Seeds Are In

Chia seeds and flaxseeds have also jumped on the superfoods bandwagon. Mirchandani praised chia seeds for their omega-3 fatty acids. "If you don't eat fatty fish two times a week, chia seeds are a great addition," she said. "They are higher in fiber than hemp and other smaller seeds, and they are great when used to make smoothies."

Mirchandani recommends grinding flaxseeds and using them to make baked goods. "Flaxseeds are an additional source of good fat, fiber, and omega-3 fatty acids," she said.

Rumsey agreed that flaxseeds need to be ground and refrigerated: "Chia seeds can be easily incorporated in foods. If you eat flaxseeds whole they go through your system and come out the other side unprocessed. Chia is digested a little bit differently. When chia seeds are mixed with liquid in a smoothie, or in your stomach in your digestive tract, it forms a gel and is absorbed that way."

Mustard greens are also fast becoming the rage, according to Cohen. "These spicy greens are rich in vitamin K, which most Americans are deficient in, and are good for your blood and bone strength," said Cohen, adding, "They're also rich in natural substances called sulforaphanes and help the body get rid of bile acid in our gut. Bile acids are used by the body to make cholesterol, so less bile acid results in less cholesterol."

Avocados and Coconut Oil Make the Grade

Avocados are fast becoming the most sought after superfood. "People are snacking on avocados; you are seeing it on menus and in sandwiches," said Mirchandani. "It's a great source of the healthy fats and is a good substitution for mayonnaise, without the saturated fat."

Coconut oil is also making a lot of noise. "Coconut oil is a heart-healthy antioxidant that can keep your body running smoother," said Cohen. "Coconut oil can help bolster your body against viruses and bacteria that can cause illness. It can also boost thyroid function and blood-sugar control, aid with digestion,

reduce cholesterol, and keep weight balanced. The oil works in baked goods and with vegetables, and pairs well with bitter greens like kale, or you can use it as part of an onion or garlic sauté, or add it to oatmeal."

Back to Basics?

So what can you do if you live in an area where many of these fancy superfoods are not currently available, or you can't afford to pay for some of the pricier superfoods?

Mirchandani recommends getting your nutritional benefits by eating any variety of fruits, vegetables, eggs, walnuts, and yogurt. Antioxidant-rich foods include a variety of peppers, berries, and anything rich in vitamin C, such as oranges, grapefruits, and papaya; or rich in vitamin A, like carrots.

"Practically everything in the produce department is a superfood."

Yogurt, which is widely available and inexpensive, is one of the most nutritious superfoods. "You are getting an excellent source of calcium, fat, and protein, and it fills you up," said Mirchandani. "You can add fruit or walnuts and have a good mini-meal. It's really about getting people to start with the basics and then moving their way upwards. Superfoods are when you take all these foods and you don't have to take a multivitamin. You get the most authentic form of the nutrients into your body and you absorb them, and you are much more healthful than just popping a multivitamin." She recommends Siggi's yogurt, an Icelandic style yogurt because it is free of hormones and antibiotics and is high in protein.

Rumsey added: "There's always a new hot thing, but antioxidants are in every fruit and vegetable so I recommend people eat a wide variety, especially the brightly colored ones like wild blueberries, or dark leafy greens like spinach. Make sure you are eating a variety and eating enough each day. Try to have a vegetable at every meal and a fruit two to three times a day. Walnuts, Brazil nuts, and almonds are also great."

Lempert agreed. "Practically everything in the produce department is a superfood," he said. "We need to consume more fruits and vegetables for a variety of reasons. For the most part they are low in calories and fat. Seafood, such as light, flaky fish that can deliver a lot of protein for a lower cost and low calories, is a superfood."

And if you can't find super grains like quinoa or think the price is too high, Rumsey said, "Going for the whole grains gives you more bang for the buck. Whole grains have more nutrients and antioxidants, whether it's quinoa, barley, brown rice, or other type of whole grain."

Future Superfood Stars

Mirchandani predicts that mint will take off. "Mint is used in a lot of cold-pressed juices. It is good for digestion, the common cold, and it helps with allergies," she said.

The spice turmeric is also on Mirchandani's radar. "Turmeric has anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory properties. It doesn't necessarily save you from getting cancer, or lower your chances of getting cancer, but it helps relieve your body of toxic cells," she said.

Michele McRae, a certified nutritionist, in California, told Healthline that spirulina is already making headlines as a superfood. Spirulina is a micro salt water plant that contains vegetable protein,

multivitamins, iron, potassium, magnesium sodium, phosphorus, and calcium. Spirulina is sold in a powder that you can add to foods.

It's anybody's guess what other new superfoods are waiting in the wings. In the meantime, Lempert said, "We need to think about balance and about reducing sugar, fat, and calories, as well as increasing fiber and foods that have vitamins and minerals. We constantly look for this magic bullet. Today it's blueberries; tomorrow: acai; the next day: kale. We need to think beyond that — to what we are eating over the entire course of a day and a week, and how is that in balance with our other foods. When it comes to health and wellness, a lot of this is common sense."