



Light Side

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Five healthy foods that will surprise you

We all know that spinach and carrots are good for us, but would you believe that tea, coffee, chocolate, avocados and fatty fish also have properties that prevent disease and enhance your health?

These five “superfoods” contain antioxidants, which are thought to fight the damage from disease-causing free radicals (unstable molecules that damage cells). Others have omega-3 fatty acids, which promote heart health and may even help to cheer you up when you’re down in the dumps.

1. Tea



Topping the list of surprising superfoods is tea – any type that comes from the leaves of the plant *Camellia sinensis*, including black, green, white and oolong. There are some intriguing studies that tea may prevent cancer, reduce the risk of

Alzheimer’s disease, and impact halitosis (bad breath), and while these studies are more speculative, the strongest evidence is on the reduction of coronary heart disease risk.

Tea’s secret ingredient is catechins, a type of flavonoid from the family of disease-fighting antioxidant phytochemicals that is also found in fruits, vegetables and red wine.

Not just any cup of tea will provide you with a healthy dose of flavonoids. Strong, steeped tea is richest in these

phytochemicals. And the longer you steep your tea, the more of these healthy extracts your beverage will contain.

Because iced tea is typically diluted, it’s not as good a source as hot tea. Bottled teas start off with low levels of flavonoids, and tend to lose potency over time. Decaffeinated tea is a good option, though it has about 10 percent fewer phytochemicals than tea with caffeine. So how much tea should you drink? Some studies have suggested that drinking three cups each day can reduce your risk of heart disease.

2. Dark chocolate

Here’s good news for chocolate lovers: dark chocolate (as opposed to milk or white chocolate) contains healthful flavonoids similar to those found in tea, red wine, fruits and vegetables.

Studies have shown that small portions of dark chocolate can improve blood vessel flow, especially in older adults, and may improve blood sugar and insulin sensitivity to help reduce the risk of diabetes.

A little chocolate goes a long way, however. The study subjects were limited to a small portion of dark chocolate per day and cut calories elsewhere in their diets to avoid weight gain.

The dark chocolate used in these studies has high levels of flavonoids and somewhat of a bittersweet taste. The flavonoids come from extracts of the cocoa bean. By choosing dark chocolate with a high percentage (70 percent) of cocoa, you’ll get more of these health-

enhancing antioxidants.

So enjoy small portions of dark chocolate as part of a healthy diet (and make up for the calories with regular physical activity).

3. Fatty fish

It’s hard to imagine that any food called “fatty” could be good for you, but when it comes to food from the sea, the fatter the fish, the better. Coldwater fatty fish, such as salmon, trout, herring, tuna, sardines and mackerel, are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, a type of unsaturated fat that promotes health in many ways. The real strength of omega-3s appears to be their ability to lower blood cholesterol, preventing blood clots and heart attacks.

Many studies have supported the idea that omega-3 fatty acids can lower cholesterol and triglycerides (blood fats), and reduce the inflammation associated with a risk of heart disease. The science for this effect is so compelling that the American Heart Association recommends eating two servings of fatty fish weekly.

If you don’t enjoy fish, you can get omega-3s in plant foods such as flaxseed, chia seed, walnuts, canola and soybean oils, but these sources are not as good as fatty fish.

Fire up the grill, sauté in olive oil or put your fish under the broiler for a quick, tasty and heart-healthy meal.

4. Avocados

Yes, these luscious green fruits are full

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This month’s On the Light Side is written by Registered Dietitian Nancy Schive



five foods from front

of fat. But most of it is the heart-healthy, monounsaturated kind that can help lower both total cholesterol and “bad” cholesterol.

Avocados contain health-promoting carotenoids. They're also rich in vitamin E and potassium, and contain some fiber to help fill you up.

While avocados are a great way to add flavor and texture to meals without too much saturated fat, portion control is critical. A medium avocado has 30 grams of fat and even though it is the healthy kind, it can add lots of extra calories if you don't watch your portion size and balance it with other wise food choices.

Slice avocados into salads, float slices of avocado on top of soups, or use instead

of butter, cream cheese or mayonnaise on breads, bagels and sandwiches.

5. Coffee

Your morning cup of coffee not only helps wake you up, it may have health benefits. The caffeine in coffee stimulates the brain and nervous system, and may lower your risk of diabetes, Parkinson's disease, mood problems, headaches and even cavities. Coffee contains many beneficial substances including chlorogenic acid, a compound in the antioxidant family that may improve glucose (sugar) metabolism. Another perk is that coffee contains magnesium, a mineral that can also improve insulin sensitivity and enhance glucose tolerance.

Still, researchers are not ready to recommend that everyone drink large doses of coffee. So enjoy your coffee in moderation, and keep in mind that a

healthy diet, normal body weight, and regular exercise are your best defense against developing type 2 diabetes.

Another plus is that coffee is naturally calorie-free. But if you load it up with cream, sugar, whipped cream and/or flavored syrup, the extra fat and calories can undermine any potential benefits.

More than five foods

Of course, it takes more than five foods to make a healthy diet. The real key to preventing disease and promoting health is a lifestyle of regular physical activity and healthy eating patterns that include a variety of nutritious foods. And remember that portion size does matter, even with healthful foods. If you gain weight because you're eating large portions of any foods, you'll negate the health benefits because of the health risks of being overweight.

Quick 'n' Easy Guac

- 4 Hass avocados, pitted and peeled
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 1/2 cup finely chopped onion
- 1/2 cup chopped cilantro
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped jalapeño, seeds removed
- 1 teaspoon salt

Instructions: Coarsely mash (do not puree) avocados. Stir in lime juice. Fold in remaining ingredients. Serve immediately or cover and refrigerate.

Yield: 12 servings

Nutrition information per 1/3 cup serving: calories: 111, fat: 10 g, fiber: 3 g, sodium: 200 mg

Fresh Tomato Salsa

- 4 cups diced tomatoes
- 3/4 cup finely diced red onion
- 1/4 cup red-wine vinegar
- 1-2 jalapenos, seeded and minced
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- Cayenne pepper, or more to taste

Instructions: Combine tomatoes, onion, vinegar, jalapeno, cilantro, salt and cayenne in a medium bowl. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

Yield: 10 servings

Nutrition information per 1/2 cup serving: calories: 21, fat: 0 g, fiber: 1 g, sodium: 124 mg

