

INSIDE PEOPLE



## Hit your peak with these super foods

[By R.J. Ignelzi]

Skip the aspirin and instead have a giant helping of spicy curry? Forget your blood pressure meds and sip another cup of green tea? Give up cholesterol-lowering statins and try a handful of almonds or walnuts?

Could good health and reduced risk of disease really be as easy as eating some super nutritious foods?

Although few nutritionists would ever guarantee that super foods will make you super healthy, most agree that edible superstars will give your body many of the nutrients it requires to operate at peak performance.

“More and more, what we see is that what we eat and do not eat is becoming the central front in [determining] whether we [are in] a state of optimum health,” says Dr. David Leopold, family practitioner and integrative medicine specialist at the Scripps Center of Integrative Medicine in San Diego. “When we look at why people do well throughout life, it continually comes down to two things: Regular exercise and eating a nutritious diet.”

So, which foods offer the healthiest bang for your buck?

It all depends on whom you talk to, the latest research and the hottest hype. To find a list of super nutritious foods you can really sink your teeth into, we asked six nutrition experts and one chef of healthy cuisine for their favorite nutritious super foods. Those that were recommended by the majority comprise our superstar list.

Other nutrient-rich foods advocated by some of our experts are offered as healthy runners-up and should also be part of your regular eating plan.

But, no matter how nutritious, these foods must be part of an overall healthy diet.

“Super foods are meant to replace other [less healthy] things in the diet,” Leopold says. “They’re not to be eaten on top of a Big Mac.”

### GREEN TEA

**Superstar qualities:** Contains beneficial polyphenols, antioxidant compounds that act as anti-inflammatory agents to promote heart and digestive health and reduce the risk of cancer, diabetes, hypertension and vision loss. If you drink flavored green tea, Dr. David Leopold, of the Scripps Center of Integrative Medicine, recommends making sure it’s all green tea (not a blend), organic and without any artificial flavorings.

**How much:** Several cups a day, but no more than two of them caffeinated.



### BROCCOLI AND OTHER CRUCIFEROUS VEGETABLES

**Superstar qualities:** High in vitamins A, C and K, along with antioxidants that prevent damage to the body’s cells. Low calorie.

“Incredibly rich in phytochemicals [plant nutrients], broccoli is a powerful cancer-fighting vegetable,” says Linda Copp, a registered dietitian and instructor of nutrition at San Diego State University.

Cynthia Thomson, diet and cancer researcher and assistant professor of nutritional sciences

at the University of Arizona, encourages people to “think beyond broccoli.”

“I’d like people to get adventurous and try more wasabi, horseradish and kale,” she says.

**How much:** One-half to 1 cup three or four times a week (as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s recommended dietary guideline of 2 1/2 cups of vegetables a day.)

### TOMATOES

**Superstar qualities:** Rich in lycopene, a powerful antioxidant that may reduce the risk of macular degeneration and breast and prostate cancer. Lycopene is easier to absorb from cooked tomatoes, such as sauce or paste, but fresh tomatoes are also beneficial.

“You can use tomato sauce in so many things,” says Cheryl Rock, professor of nutrition at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine, explaining that by consuming it as a sauce, you’re getting a condensed version. “Don’t be stingy with the tomato sauce on the pizza. Pour plenty of it on.”

**How much:** One serving (one medium tomato or 1 cup of cherry tomatoes or one-half cup of tomato sauce) a day.

### LEAFY GREENS

**Superstar qualities:** Spinach, collard greens, swiss chard and mustard greens are concentrated source of carotenoids, such as beta-carotene and lutein, which provide powerful antioxidant protection.

“These greens are all high in calcium and minerals and fiber and a good addition to

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your diet. They provide a lot more nutrients than lettuce,” says Dr. Andrew Weil, director of the integrative medicine program at the University of Arizona and author of several books, including “Eating Well for Optimum Health” (Time Warner, \$25) and “Healthy Aging” (Anchor, \$15).

“You can stir-fry them or steam them. By cooking them lightly, they not only taste better, but the nutrients are more bio-available.”

**How much:** One-half to 1 cup three or four times a week.

**NUTS**

**Superstar qualities:** Nuts, especially almonds and walnuts, might lower LDL (“bad”) cholesterol. High in protein and healthy unsaturated fat, which contain naturally occurring cholesterol-lowering compounds called plantsterols. High in omega-3 fatty acids. Contain ellagic acid, a cancer-fighting antioxidant.

The Food and Drug Administration has approved health claims stating that the consumption of most nuts (excluding Brazil and macadamia nuts) can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

**How much:** At about 200 calories per ounce, don’t go nuts over nuts. A small handful or 1 1/2 ounces a day is enough. Substitute this for that candy bar you crave at 3 in the afternoon.



**BERRIES**

**Superstar qualities:** Blueberries, cranberries, blackberries or strawberries, they’re all a rich source of antioxidants, so

they fight cell-damaging free radicals, which may help prevent cancer and slow aging.

Weil keeps organic berries in his freezer so he can enjoy them as a snack or low-sugar dessert all year long.

**How much:** Eat one-half to 1 cup of fresh or frozen berries every day.

**WILD SALMON**

**Superstar qualities:** Rich in essential omega-3 fatty acids, which help keep triglyceride levels normal and may reduce the chance of heart disease. Has anti-inflammatory properties that can help with rheumatoid arthritis pain. A good protein source. Wild is better than farm-raised salmon because there are fewer contaminants. Eat it canned, frozen or fresh.

**How much:** Eat 3 ounces two to four times a week.

**SOY FOODS**

**Superstar qualities:** Whether in the form of tofu, soy nuts, soy milk or edamame, soy foods are good sources of vegetable protein. Soy also contains isoflavones, estrogenlike substances that protect and help maintain healthy bones. Contains omega-3 fatty acids, which promote heart health.

**How much:** One to two (one-half-cup) servings a day.

**SUPER FOODS: RUNNERS-UP**

**EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL**

**Superstar qualities:** This monounsaturated fat is considered a “good” fat that helps reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and some cancers. Use it as your main cooking oil and base of your salad dressings.

Studies have shown that the extra-virgin variety has anti-inflammatory properties, says Dr. Steven Pratt, an ophthalmologist at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego and author of the books “SuperFoods Rx” (William Morrow, \$25) and “SuperFoods Healthstyle” (William Morrow, \$25). He recommends looking for the words “first cold pressed” on the label to indicate that little heat was used.

**How much:** 1 to 2 tablespoons a day.

**YOGURT OR KEFIR**

**Superstar qualities:** High in protein, calcium and beneficial for the gastrointestinal tract. Contains probiotics (healthy bacterial) to help with digestion and promote healthy immune system.

Make sure it contains Lactobacillus bulgaricus and Streptococcus thermophilis, the live bacteria that host health benefits.

**How much:** 6 to 8 ounces a day.

**SPICES AND HERBS**

**Superstar qualities:** Turmeric, cinnamon, oregano, basil and others are concentrated forms of phytonutrients with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

“Herbs and spices are a healthy, low-calorie way to add flavor and interest to all kinds of food,” says chef Rosie Daley (Knopf, \$17), author of the book “The Healthy Kitchen With Andrew Weil, M.D.”

Pratt notes a USDA study that found that half a teaspoon a day of cinnamon lowers blood-sugar levels in patients with type 2 diabetes and brought down their bad cholesterol.

Studies show that turmeric blocks the same enzymes we try to block with aspirin, offering protection from cardiovascular disease, Leopold says.

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**How much:** Use them whenever you can.

### BEANS

**Superstar qualities:** Red, white, brown or green, they're all low in fat and high in fiber, folate and antioxidants, and can help protect against heart disease and moderate insulin levels.

In order to make beans a complete protein, they must be eaten with a grain. Copp suggests combining beans with brown rice or quinoa.

**How much:** Eat one-half to 1 cup several times a week.

### POMEGRANATES

**Superstar qualities:** Contains phytonutrients that help fight against heart disease, hypertension, some cancers and diabetes. Loaded with vitamin C.

**How much:** 4 to 6 ounces of juice a day. Copp suggests sprinkling pomegranate seeds on salads or eating them as a snack.

### DARK CHOCOLATE

**Superstar qualities:** Dark chocolate (not milk) that's at least 70% cocoa solids is rich in flavonoids, antioxidants that are good for heart health and reducing blood pressure.

**How much:** Chocolate is high in calories, so don't overdo it. An ounce a day is enough to give you nutritional benefits without blowing your diet.

### KIWI FRUIT

**Superstar qualities:** Rich in vitamin C, potassium and fiber.

According to Pratt, kiwi helps thin the blood like aspirin without the side effects.

"Compared with other fruits, the kiwi is the most nutritionally dense. It's a powerhouse of vitamin C (more than an orange) and antioxidants," Copp says.

**How much:** Eat regularly as part of your USDA recommended two servings of fruit a day.

### OATS AND WHOLE GRAINS

**Superstar qualities:** Oats and other whole grains provide B vitamins and fiber to keep you feeling full until lunchtime. Oatmeal has been shown to lower cholesterol and help stabilize blood-sugar levels.

**How much:** Eat at least three serving of whole grains a day. One cup of cooked oatmeal or one slice of whole-wheat bread is one serving.

Copley News Service librarian Beth Wood contributed to this article.

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