What ’Eat Sensibly’ Means

Forget the superfoods hype. Our bodies need a variety of fresh, wholesome foods to function properly.

December 10, 2010 By Gerrie E. Summers

Is there any food that can be consumed in moderation and meet all the body’s nourishment needs? Despite an abundance of catchphrases and claims that seemingly nod to the affirmative—“This superfood can change your life!”—the simple answer is no.

But while some foods do indeed boast more benefits than others, Madison Avenue’s healthy eating hype may prompt people to eat excessive amounts of said “miracle” food (soy is a perfect example). And this can sometimes do more harm than good.

What’s the best advice? Well, first, cancel your mission to zero in on a single-food nutrient source. The best nutrition plan is to eat a variety of healthful foods. “There is no such thing as the ‘perfect food,’” says dietician Lisa Dorfman, author of *The Reunion Diet*. “But there are very nutritious foods. These are what you should include in your diet. And avoid overdosing on any one food or beverage. Moderation is key.”

But all that being said, these five foods come as close to nutrient-dense perfection as we dare to claim. Their health benefits, according to research, play a significant role in treating and preventing various illnesses and disease. In addition to explaining why the five foods are healthful and what nutrients they provide, Dorfman serves up informative culinary tips about how to cook them. It’s our idea of a High Five!

FISH

Why: At least two servings of fish per week will provide low-fat, quality protein, according to the American Heart Association. Cardiologists recommend we eat fish to help prevent heart disease, lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Nutrients: Fish contains riboflavin (B-12), which helps the body metabolize amino acids, fatty acids and carbohydrates; vitamin D, which aids in calcium absorption; and the minerals iodine, magnesium, zinc, iron, calcium, phosphorus and potassium, necessary for maintaining muscle and nerve function and regulating water balance to maintain proper hydration.

Dorfman’s Advice: “[Eating] salmon is a great way to get omega-3 fatty acids—essential

fats—which are hard to get in other types of fish. Omega-3s are anti-inflammatory and help the body absorb vitamins A, D, E and K."

Tip: Prepare fish baked, poached, grilled or steamed (not fried). Flavor a salmon fillet with herbs, lemon juice and olive oil and bake for about 10 minutes. Serve with steamed broccoli and wild rice (add a few dried or fresh cranberries to the rice for a little sweetness). Drain and mix with plain low-fat yogurt or mayonnaise, chopped celery, onion, cucumber, green bell peppers, radishes and a little lemon juice, then season with pepper. Serve over lettuce or mixed salad greens. (Reach for canned salmon that says "wild-caught." The soft, edible bones are a great source of calcium.)

LEGUMES

Why: These types of veggies include beans, peas and lentils. They are one of Mother Nature's best sources of soluble fiber. They lower LDL cholesterol levels, slow carbohydrate absorption, control blood glucose levels and reduce cancer risk. Plus, beans are low-fat sources of high-quality protein.

Nutrients: Beans are rich in folic acid, copper, iron, magnesium and vitamin B-6 (the latter helps lower levels of the amino acid homocysteine, which when elevated, puts you at risk of heart disease and stroke). Soybeans provide the same nutrients as other beans but are also a rare plant source of complete protein. They boast nine essential amino acids the body cannot make. Like other legumes, lentils are a good protein source. And peas are an excellent source of B complex, C and A vitamins as well as vision-supportive lutein (an orange-yellow pigment found in fruits and veggies).

Dorfman's Advice: "Beans are a great source of low glycemic index carbohydrates [they don't spike blood sugar], protein and fiber, B vitamins and minerals such as iron and magnesium. An all-around wonderful food."

Tip: Use beans in soup; add to rice as a side dish with meat or fish. Mix with red onion, green pepper, lemon juice, red wine vinegar, olive oil, dry or fresh herbs and black pepper for a delicious bean salad. Try edamame as a snack straight out of the pod, or boil for three to five minutes and add to stir-fries or soups.

DARK GREEN VEGETABLES

Why? These low-fat, low-calorie, high-protein, high-fiber leafy greens and cruciferous vegetables are powerhouses of vitamins and minerals. The stars of this group are broccoli and kale. Broccoli's anticancer properties boost DNA repair in cells, reduce the risk of prostate cancer and may also block cancer cell growth. Broccoli also helps prevent heart disease and contains the highest levels of carotenoids (a plant pigment). Kale has cholesterol-lowering benefits (more when steamed than raw) and cardiovascular health benefits, with a significant amount of omega-3 and double the vitamin K found in other cruciferous vegetables. Kale helps regulate body detoxification and lowers the risk of five cancers (bladder, breast, colon, ovary and prostate) thanks to carotenoids and flavanoids (antioxidants that fight aging).

Nutrients: Iron, calcium, potassium and magnesium, vitamins A, C, K and E, several B vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids.

Dorfman's Advice: "Dark greens are a great source of folic acid, fiber and cancer-fighting phytonutrients, with anti-inflammatory effects on joints. They are acceptable on most diet programs—which is unusual."

Tip: Eat dark green vegetables with a teaspoon of dietary fat, such as olive or canola oil, to help the body absorb their vitamins. Add kale, collard and mustard greens to soups and stir-fries. Add romaine, spinach or arugula to tuna, chicken or turkey wraps. Juice romaine and spinach with cucumber, green apple and lemon juice. Cut kale into thin strips and sprinkle with lemon juice. Steam with chopped garlic for five minutes for additional health benefits.

WHOLE GRAINS

Why? These low-fat, fiber-rich complex carbs still have their nutrient-rich bran, germ and endosperm layers intact. The human body digests whole grains slowly, ensuring no blood sugar and insulin spikes.

Nutrients: Includes B vitamins, protein (contains all nine essential amino acids), phytonutrients, selenium, potassium, magnesium, iron and other minerals.

Dorfman's Advice: "Choosing whole grains ensures the minerals are not stripped in the refining process. Quinoa is a great gluten-free whole grain protein source."

Tips: When choosing grains, the word "whole" should be the first item on the ingredient list. Substitute whole wheat for white bread, whole grain bagels for plain, and low-fat bran muffins for pastries. Instead of white rice, opt for kasha, brown rice, wild rice or bulgur. Choose high-fiber cereals (bran flakes, shredded wheat, oatmeal), and use wild rice or barley in soups.

BERRIES

Why? These tiny fruits pack a big nutritional punch. They're chock-full of antioxidants to combat cell damage caused by free radicals and to protect against a variety of illnesses, such as macular degeneration, colon and ovarian cancer and oxidative stress. In addition, the colorful fruits may help battle Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. Blueberries and raspberries also contain lutein.

Nutrients: Berries contain vitamins A, C and E, folic acid, selenium, calcium, phytonutrients, polyphenols and anthocyanins (compounds that give dark berries their color).

Dorfman's Advice: "Berries are fiber-rich, and phytonutrients boost their antioxidant potential."

Tips: Enjoy berries in a variety of ways: Eat them alone, mix them with yogurt and granola, blend them in a smoothie, or sprinkle them on top of cereals and salads.

Sounds perfectly nutritious, don't you think?

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