

Superfood or SUPER MYTH?

Optimise health, prevent disease, boost brain power, lose weight and look younger. Linia Patel peels back the hype to examine some of the claims behind the so called 'superfoods'.

From blueberries to goji berries, garlic to green tea and cinnamon to chocolate, we have all heard foods being referred to as 'superfoods'. But what does this really mean? Should we radically change our way of eating? Have blueberries at each meal? Drink gallons of goji berry juice and nibble the day away with guilt-free chocolate? And how do you advise your clients?

What are superfoods?

All foods contain some nutrients. However, some foods are thought to have such a high content of certain nutrients that they offer additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition, so much so, that they are referred to as superfoods. Despite its common use, however, there is actually no official scientific definition of the term superfood. In general, they tend to be some combination of the following:

- Contain phytochemicals that have potent antioxidant properties
- Rich in vitamins and minerals
- Contain significant amounts of omega-3 fatty acids or monounsaturated fatty acids
- High in fibre
- Low in calories

The superfood trend began with blueberries in the late 90s. The hype continued with oats, tomatoes, salmon, black rice, green tea, dark chocolate and seaweed. Now, long lists of exotic and rather expensive foods have been credited with health-enhancing, memory-boosting and weight-losing qualities.

With each announcement, sales have leapt, superfood cookbooks have multiplied and supermarkets have rushed to meet demand, offering a year-round supply of items once available in only the most obscure of health food shops.

Research has shown that some of the claims about superfoods cannot be proved

In the past, food companies were able to claim products as superfoods without explaining what made that product so beneficial. However, this changed in July 2007 when a new European Nutrition and Health Claims regulation came into effect. This regulation means products are not allowed to claim that they are a superfood

or make other health claims such as 'fights cancer' or 'helps lower cholesterol' without scientific evidence to back this up. Now, only foods with true added health benefits can be labelled as such.

Damaging advice

The reputation of superfoods has been under attack. Research has shown that some of the claims about superfoods cannot be proved, and any specific benefits may not be available to everyone who eats them. What's more, not only is there no scientific definition of a superfood, but many nutritionists and dieticians



THE TRUTH BEHIND THE HYPE



Blueberries

Claim The superfood of the century. Packed with phytochemicals, flavonoids, vitamins,

minerals and antioxidants (particularly anthocynins), berries have been labelled the best food to boost memory and brain function as we age, increase IQ and energy, and boost immunity against infection.

Reality There isn't any published evidence supporting the role of berries in relation to an increase in IQ. They do contain several important nutrients but these appear across most berries and a wide range of other plant-based foods.



Pomegranate juice

Claim Pomegranates contain plant antioxidants called polyphenols. A major

polyphenol antioxidant being ellagic acid, is a supposed anti-carcinogen. Pomegranates are widely claimed to have eight times the antioxidant potential of tea.

Reality

Research has shown that antioxidants can reduce the growth of cancer cells, however, this has been done only in laboratory studies involving cells or animals. Studies in humans haven't confirmed this effect. Consuming a 180ml serving of pomegranate juice leads to an increase in blood antioxidant levels for one hour, but the antioxidants are rapidly removed from the blood.



Seaweed

Claim A so-called nutrient powerhouse that stimulates the immune system, delays

ageing, boosts brain power and guards against dermatitis, obesity, heavy metal poisoning and depression.

Reality The nutrients in seaweed are found in all green vegetables. In addition, seaweed produces natural toxins called microcystins that can cause liver damage in humans and are thought to be potentially carcinogenic.



Tomatoes

Claim Whether you eat them raw, grilled, oven-roasted, sun-dried, tinned, juiced

or in sauces, tomatoes are the best dietary source of lycopenes: a powerful antioxidant. Claims have been made that tomato-based foods reduce the risk of developing certain cancers (prostate, colon and bladder cancer).

Reality Men whose diet contains high amounts of lycopene have been found to be at a lower risk of prostate cancer. However, scientists aren't sure whether the lycopene itself actually helps to prevent prostate cancer, or whether it's just a coincidence that men who have high levels happen to be less likely to develop cancer.



Wheatgrass

Claim A blood cleanser and detoxifier attributed to both the 'natural plant enzymes' and

the chlorophyll content of the freshly-juiced grass, claimed to 'detoxify the body'. Wheatgrass does contain the antioxidant apigenin.

Reality The commonly held assumption that a 30ml shot of wheatgrass juice is nutritionally equivalent to a kilogram of vegetables is a complete myth. A floret or two of broccoli, or a tablespoon of spinach, contains more folic acid and vitamin C than 30ml of wheatgrass juice. Chlorophyll is not absorbed into the body and the supposed high levels in wheatgrass are no higher than other green vegetables.



believe the concept itself could actually be harmful. Nominating some foods as magic bullets may give the impression that ordinary and everyday foods are somehow deficient, leading to unbalanced diets. In practice, you would be better off buying regular and larger quantities of fresh fruit and vegetables from your local market than spending a tenner on a small packet of exotic berries with extravagant health claims.

Super diet not superfood

The concept of superfoods has indeed captured the interest and imagination of consumers. However, because different foods contain different amounts of nutrients, the best way to ensure that you get all the nutrients needed to promote good health and reduce the overall risk of major chronic diseases is to eat a wide variety of foods each day. Instead of looking for individual superfoods, it is important to concentrate on trying to eat a 'super diet'. A super diet is a diet

that includes an abundance of vegetables and fruit, legumes and whole-grains, moderate amounts of olive oil, nuts, fish and lean meat. You can even enjoy an occasional glass of red wine with dinner. A super diet does, however, limit the intake of processed and refined foods such as biscuits, cakes, crisps and even chocolate – a so-called superfood. **fp**