

# Super foods

## Fact vs fiction

### **Barely a week goes by without the discovery of yet another great super food. But what foods really are 'super' at different life stages?**

From blueberries to salmon, tea to turkey, oats to oranges... the range of foods now described as 'super foods' is overwhelming. These foods promise to lower cholesterol and blood pressure, aid weight loss, boost our immune system and potentially lower your risk for some cancers.

Sometimes the hype overtakes the facts and not everything you read about super foods is accurate. But there certainly are some foods that are more nutritious than others. So, rather than getting swept up by the hype of super foods, make choices based on whether one food may be more superior than another.

### **What makes a food a super food?**

Nutritionist Catherine Saxelby looks for a number of qualities when deciding whether a food fits the 'super food' category. These include a food being rich in vitamins, minerals, omega-3 fat or fibre, compared to its kilojoule count.

According to Catherine, other qualities include: having 25% or more of the recommended intake of two or more nutrients in a serve; containing significant quantities of health-promoting or protective substances such as phytonutrients; minimal processing; and research linking it to reduced risk of illness.

"Small studies show that about half a teaspoon a day of cinnamon cassia may help lower blood glucose in people with diabetes," says Catherine.

"A cup of regular tea now appears to contain the same antioxidant potential as green tea. In a nutshell, super foods are nutrient-rich, natural and won't overload you, and they're easy to incorporate into your daily diet."

### **Reading between the headlines**

But don't get carried away by headlines that may not give all the facts.

"Sometimes the headlines don't tell you the huge quantities you need to eat to see a clinical effect," explains Catherine.

For instance, research suggests that cranberry juice can keep urinary tract infections at bay, but you need to drink at least 300ml – a large glass – every day to see any benefit. Similarly, some studies have shown that garlic lowers cholesterol, but volunteers taking part in this research had at least four cloves a day or equivalent in garlic extract or powder.

"Often a super food does have some super qualities, but question the hype around the claims," says Jean Hailes naturopath, Sandra Villella.

"Look at and evaluate the food's nutritional qualities and what benefits it provides."

So what super foods really are super and should be a regular part of your diet?



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### Top foods for younger women

**Unhulled sesame seeds** – around 10 times higher in calcium (important for strong bones) than regular sesame seeds.

**Beetroot** – rich in disease-fighting antioxidants, beetroot juice has been shown to lower blood pressure and is a good source of magnesium, sodium, potassium and vitamin C.

**Lean meat and fish** – many younger women often don't get enough protein, particularly if they are vegetarian, dieting or exercising at moderate to high levels. Protein requirements also increase during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Fish and meat are good sources of iron and zinc, and many young women do not have adequate amounts of these foods.

**Raw cacao** – (pronounced kak-cow) is cacao roasted at a lower temperature and has greater amounts of flavonol antioxidants than traditional cocoa powder made from the roasted bean, and is richer in minerals such as magnesium. A small amount satisfies sweet cravings.

### Top foods at midlife

**Linseeds (flaxseeds)** – two daily dessertspoons of freshly ground linseed or flaxseed may improve vaginal dryness. They are a good source of omega-3 fatty acids and of lignans (a type of phytoestrogen).

**Sardines** – rich in omega 3 fatty acids, protein and an excellent source of calcium because you eat the bones.

**Prunes** – a rich source of antioxidants (more than blueberries) and an excellent source of fibre.

**Yoghurt** – low fat yoghurt with live cultures, contains calcium and the cultures are important for gut health.

**Broccoli** – part of the Brassica vegetable family, which may reduce risk of some cancers, including breast cancer. Eat 2 serves (1 serve = a half cup cooked) a day for maximum health benefit.

### Top foods for older women

**Grain foods** – wheat germ and lecithin are high in B vitamins and minerals and an easy and nutritious breakfast supplement. Bran tops up fibre intake and prevents constipation.

**Green leafy vegetables** – are good sources of minerals and folate and magnesium, which helps to keep blood and bones healthy and plays a role in the function of a healthy heart, digestive and nervous systems.

**Sardines and mackerel** – sardines are a super food for older women. They are an excellent source of calcium to maintain bone strength if you eat the soft edible bones and are also good for general cardiovascular health thanks to their omega-3s.

### Making the most of the foods that are good for you

The myths around some super foods can be confusing. Is it better to eat vegetables raw or cooked? Are quinoa and Acai berries really as good as reports say they are? Can soy help control hot flashes?

The research as to whether soy can effectively treat hot flashes has mixed results. Some studies show that soy may alleviate frequency and severity of hot flashes and others show it does not. There is significant variation amongst women as to whether they are able to metabolise the phytoestrogens in soy to a more potent phytoestrogen, called equol – which is more 'oestrogenic'.





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It has been shown that about a third of individuals in western populations where soy is not a common component of the diet are equal producers. This variation may explain why some women may get symptom relief from soy in their diet, while others do not.

The cereal substitute, quinoa, has become one of the most popular and recent super foods because it is a complete protein.

“It is one of the only non-animal sources of complete protein, so the hype around quinoa is substantiated,” Sandra says.

Including Acai berries in your diet won't do any harm, but it's better to eat a diet that includes a wide range of fresh fruits and vegetables. Most of the claims about Acai berries have not been substantiated.

The debate about whether vegetables should be cooked or eaten raw for maximum nutrition continues. Many vegetables are water and heat soluble so cooking can sometimes reduce the vitamin and mineral content.

“But for some people, for example the elderly, cooked foods may be more easily chewed or digestible,” says Sandra.

“If you do cook vegetables, they are better lightly steamed or added to soups rather than boiled, and enjoy vegetables raw in a salad where you can.

The best thing you can do for your health is to eat a variety of fresh foods each day.”

#### Further information

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