



All Foods Are NOT Created Equal.

By Dr. Cara Hillwig

There is no question about it — all foods are NOT created equal. While some foods are loaded with fiber, vitamins, and other key nutrients, others are virtually devoid of such healthful benefits. This becomes important not only from a weight loss perspective, but — perhaps more importantly — from a health-conscious one. Breads, crackers pastas and other flour-derived and/or processed foods, for example, may pack in significant carbohydrates and calories while offering you very little in the way of healthful nutrients.

In contrast, nutrients found naturally in several whole foods may help support immune function, boost metabolism and help fight dangerous — potentially cancerous — cellular changes. Also, besides the obvious "eliminative" benefit, fiber can help the body to deal with excess carbs through a type of binding action. Fiber can bind to sugar and help slow down and prevent some of the sugar's absorption during digestion. This, in turn, effectively reduces some of the negative glycemic impact of the foods we ingest.

Many well-rounded examples can be found in various fresh vegetables and fruits — especially with their peels/skin intact as this is a fiber source. While some of these foods may require a little more time and effort to prepare, their balanced nature makes them an ideal choice for deriving fuel and nutrients. Given the desire to look and feel our best, why not — when given a choice — opt for including well-rounded foods over "empty calorie" alternatives?

Within the realm of "whole foods" there are some real stand-outs — foods that yield tremendous nutrient "bang" for your caloric "buck." One such example is flax seeds. When freshly ground, one-quarter cup of these seeds contain about 11 g of fiber and 200 mg of magnesium along with approximately 10 g of the heart-healthy omega 3 fatty acids. Research shows that omega-3 fatty acids help make blood less "sticky" and therefore less likely to form the clots that can contribute to heart disease. In addition, omega-3 fatty acids may help lower blood pressure and risk of stroke. When mixed into a shake or added as a topping to oatmeal or a salad, these versatile seeds also add a nice, nutty taste and texture to meals along with some tangible health benefits!

Other wonderful foods are of the dark leafy green variety. Leafy vegetables like Swiss chard, kale, bok choy, and other dark greens are good sources of fiber, minerals, and vitamins including magnesium and folate (a.k.a. folic acid or B9). Recent studies have shown that folate can help lower levels of a heart dis-



ease-promoting amino acid called homocysteine that may accumulate in our blood. Experts now see homocysteine as an important cardiovascular risk factor. High levels of homocysteine can not only damage the walls of our coronary arteries but can also promote blood clots. Such clots can ultimately be the cause of a stroke or heart attack.

With this in mind, consuming leafy greens on a daily basis is a good rule of thumb. But not all leafy greens were created equally, either. "Iceberg" lettuce offers very little in the way of nutrition or even fiber. And, while it could theoretically be considered a source of some extra water in your diet, iceberg lettuce is also unfortunately is often also a source of harmful bacteria. If you do partake in this light green "water", please make sure that it has been properly cleaned — with soap AND running water — before eating.

Generally, it is "the darker and/or more fibrous, the better" when it comes to your green veggies, and Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage — members of the cruciferous family — are no exceptions. Besides containing fiber, folate, magnesium and other key vitamins and minerals, these vegetables possess a unique substance known as indole-3-carbinol (I3C) that seems to help liver function. Research has shown that

detoxification of toxic substances increases when animals are supplemented with I3C. These animals were seen to have a decreased risk of cancer. While not yet fully studied in humans, many researchers are theorizing that cruciferous vegetables may help ward off cancer in our bodies as well.

Additional substances exerting potentially anti-cancer effects - antioxidants — may be found in high concentrations in certain fruits and vegetables. Antioxidants work by essentially neutralizing reactive and destructive compounds known as "free radicals" that are believed to damage cells and induce mutations that sometimes may lead to cancer. Examples of some good sources for antioxidants include grapes, blueberries, strawberries, citrus, peppers, sweet potatoes, carrots, pumpkins and other squash. Some of these examples also contain specific phytochemicals and other complementary nutrients that may help antioxidants to be properly absorbed and used.

And — despite bad press about their mercury contamination — fatty fish such as tuna, sardines, mackerel and salmon can still be quite healthy choices. Good sources of protein, zinc and iron, these fish also contain omega-3 fatty acids in an ideal form for our use. The omega-3 fatty acids found in flaxseeds and other plant matter is, in contrast, not readily usable by a human body and therefore must undergo a number of chemical reactions to get to the point that our bodies need them to be. Sometimes these reactions become halted, preventing the necessary conversions almost entirely. It is for this reason that many nutritionists and holistic doctors recommend including a fish source for those who wish to derive the maximum benefits of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Keep in mind that smaller, younger fish will not have accumulated as much methylmercury in their fatty tissues as their older counterparts; the older fish simply have been around longer and had ample opportunity to store more mercury. Interestingly, it turns out that certain canned tuna — particularly of the "chunk light" variety — has been found to have only very trace amounts of methylmercury (see www.fda.org). It seems that due to the high demands of the canning industry, there can be a reliance on younger, smaller fish. In contrast, it is canned albacore and tuna steaks that come from a much larger and older fish that have been implicated with high contamination levels.

When considering fish consumption, is also helpful to weigh the benefits against the risks. There is evidence that there are considerable benefits along with modest risks. A decent compromise — and one I often recommend — would be to eat fish moderately (a few meals per week) and to try to use younger fish whenever possible. It is this way that you can reap the benefits with - hopefully — a minimized risk.

For snacking purposes — and, if non-allergic — a handful of tree nuts such as almonds, cashews, Brazil nuts, or peanuts can also impart healthful benefits. These are a good source of protein and fiber as well as the healthy omega-6 fatty acids. Like flaxseeds, tree nuts are also relatively low in saturated fat. When looking for something quick to fuel your workout or curb that

mid-day hunger, a few ounces of raw or roasted unsalted almonds, for example, may offer you an easy — and healthy — alternative to junk food.

In summing up, food need not just provide us energy and satiety. We may also derive certain benefits from including a variety of well-rounded whole foods in our daily diets. One way to achieve this is to rotate through the myriad of choices available in quality markets. I often tell clients to fill their shopping cards with whole foods of all different colors — red, yellow, green, purple — as well as foods of different textures. Variety helps ensure that a more complete range of vitamins, minerals, and other key nutrients has been covered. In doing so, we may find that variety is not only the spice of life — it is vitality.



Cara Hillwig, MS, DC holds a master's degree in human nutrition and a doctorate in chiropractic. Her practice is at 512 S. 4th Street, Philadelphia 19147. Contact cara.hillwig@phillyfitmagazine.com