What are functional foods?

Functional Foods are foods that provide more than basic nutrition. They have bioactive food components that can potentially enhance health when eaten on a regular basis as part of a varied diet. The simplest examples of functional foods are fruits and vegetables. These offer life essential vitamins and minerals, but also contain an array of phytochemicals (plant chemicals) that may fight certain diseases.

An important point to remember is that all the nutrients and healthy components that work together, but synergistically. Research indicates that isolated healthy food components added to fortified bars, drinks, or supplements may not present the same disease prevention benefits as a natural whole foods diet consumed over time.

Resources

The American Dietetic Association Position Paper on Functional Foods www.eatright.org


The University of Michigan Integrative Medicine Healing Foods Pyramid www.med.umich.edu/mtf/nutrition/knowhow/may2.htm

Specific Phytochemicals

Carotenoids—Leafy green vegetables, corn, eggs, and citrus are sources of a lutein and zeaxanthin carotenoids. These have key roles in maintaining healthy vision. Tomatoes, canned tomato products, and watermelon are sources of lycopene—a carotenoid that maintains prostate health.

Flavonoids—Compounds from this large group of phytochemicals are found in a variety of foods and their potential health benefits are numerous. Potential benefits include: overall disease protection from enhanced cellular antioxidant defenses; roles in heart and urinary tract health; and maintenance of brain function.

Isothiocyanates—Cruciferous vegetables like cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, collards, kale, and Brussels sprouts are rich in these phytochemicals. Animal studies and human population research show isothiocyanates fight cancer and enhance our bodies’ natural antioxidant defenses and detoxification systems.

Sulfides and Thiols—Pungent vegetables like onions, garlic, cabbage, and collards are rich in these phytochemicals. Potential health benefits include enhanced detoxification of undesirable compounds, cancer fighting, and maintenance of heart health and immune function.

Provided by your food co-op

Functional Foods

FLORIDA

Everman Natural Foods
315 W Garden St. Pensacola
New Leaf Market
1235 Aplinuen Pkwy Tallahassee
GEORGIA

Life Grocery & Cafe
1435 Roswell Rd. Marietta
Savannah Natural Foods Market
467 Monticello Ave. N.I. Atlanta
KENTUCKY

Good Foods Market & Cafe
450-D Scottfair Dr. Lexington
MAINE

Blue Hill Co-op Community Market & Cafe
4 Breakwater Rd. Blue Hill
Rising Tide Community Market
323 Main St. Damariscotta
MARYLAND

Silver Spring Co-op
8399 Gerdes Street Silver Spring
Takoma Park Co-op
201 Silver Alice Terrace Park
The Common Market
5728 Uni Br. Bayside Pl. Frederick
MASSACHUSETTS

Berkeley Co-op Market
45 Bridge St. Great Barrington
Green Fields Market
144 Main St. Greenfield
Harvest Co-op Markets
181 Mass Ave. Cambridge
37 South St. Jamaica Plain
McCusker’s Market
3 State St. Southhampton
River Valley Market
320 North King St. Northampton
Wild Oats Co-op Market
220 Main St. W indexes
NEW HAMPSHIRE

Concord Cooperative Market
34 South Main St. Concord
Hanover Co-op Food Store
45 South Park St. Hanover
Harvest Co-op Market
31 Lynn Rd. Hanover
Kearsarge Cooperative Grocer
51 Newham Rd. New London
Lebanon Co-op Food Store
12 Common Resource Park Lebanon
NEW YORK

Abundance Cooperative Market
42 Plattsburg St. Rochester
Flashburn Food Cooperative
1415 Convent Rd. Brooklyn
GreenStar Cooperative Market
213 N. College St. Ithaca
701 W. Buffalo St. Ithaca
Honest Weight Food Co-op, Inc.
481 Convent Ave. Albany
Hungry Hollow Co-op
841 Cheesew Ridge Cheesew Ridge
Lexington Cooperative Market
807 Bloomwood Ave. Buffalo
Syracuse Real Food Co-op
618 Seneca Rd. Syracuse
WASHINGTON

Southcoast Marketplaces
480 High St. Portland
Deep Roots Market
3272 Spring Garden St. Greensboro
French Broad Food Co-op
50 Blythewood Ave. Asheville
Hendersonville Community Co-op
715 Old Spruce Pine Hwy. Hendersonville
Tidal Creek Cooperative Food Market
1237 Old Historic Dr. Suite 100 Wilmington
Weaver Street Market
191 W Market St. Carbondale
716 Market St. Chapel Hill
128 South Clinton St. Hillsborough
PENNSYLVANIA

East End Food Co-op
754 5th Ave. Rossburg
Weavers Way Co-op
159 Carpenter Ln. Philadelphia
2129 72nd Ave. Philadelphia
Whole Foods Cooperative
1341 West 26th St. Erie
TENNESSEE

Three Rivers Market
137 North Broadway Knoxville
VERMONT

Brattleboro Food Co-op
3 Main St. Brattleboro
City Market/Ocean River Co-op
82 2nd St. Burlington
Hunger Mountain Co-op
420 Vermont Dairy Hwy. Montpelier
Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op
27 Wellington St. Middlebury
Putney Food Co-op
8 Canal Street W. Putney
Springfield Food Co-op
125 Rice St. Po. Box 68 Springfield
Co-op Food Store
209 High St. White River Junction
Upper Valley Food Co-op
174 N. Main St. White River Junction
VIRGINIA

Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op
139 Grand Blvd. Roanoke

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Key functional food components and potential health benefits

Antioxidant vitamins

Vitamin C, Vitamin E, and Beta-Carotene—Antioxidants protect the cells in our body from damage by free-radical compounds. Regular intake of antioxidant-rich foods has the potential to ward off a variety of diseases; specifically it can reduce cancer risk and support healthy cardiovascular function.

B-Vitamins: Folate, Vitamin B-6, and Vitamin B-12—These three B-vitamins work together to maintain vascular function and health by keeping levels of the amino acid homocysteine under control. High blood levels of homocysteine are a marker for vascular disease risk. Low intake of any one of these three vitamins may increase risk for heart disease and stroke. Although available in a variety of foods, an easy way to ensure you are getting adequate amounts of each is to regularly include fortified cereals and grains in your diet.

B-vitamins are also essential for energy metabolism where they help break down carbohydrate into glucose. Many energy drinks have added B-vitamins; however, research suggests persons who consume a reasonable diet, and are not vitamin deficient, will not see improved exercise performance by using vitamin fortified drinks.

Minerals

Calcium—Clinical trials show calcium-rich foods can lower risk for osteoporosis. More recently calcium intake from low-fat dairy has been linked to improved weight-loss for dieters, but the evidence here is still highly debated by scientists.

Potassium—Potassium plays a role in regulating blood pressure. A study called the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) found a low-fat, low salt diet containing potassium-rich fruits and vegetables helped lower blood pressure.

Selenium—Several studies associate selenium with anti-cancer activity, including evidence for skin, prostate, colorectal, and esophageal cancers. However, researchers advise more selenium is not always better and high-dose supplements could have negative effects. Best is to regularly include selenium-rich foods in your diet, such as nuts, fish, poultry, and whole grains.

Omega-3 fatty acids

DHA/EPA and ALA—These acronyms pertain to two different types of omega-3 fatty acids. DHA and EPA are found in animal sources and are the most easily used omega-3 fats for our body. ALA is found in plant sources and our body must convert it to EPA and DHA.

Omega-3 fats are shown to reduce heart disease risk, and help maintain mental and visual function. The average American diet is low in omega-3-rich foods. To get enough, incorporate omega-3-rich foods. To get enough, incorporate nuts, fish, poultry, and whole grains.

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Phytosterols

Phytosterols are plant compounds that lower cholesterol by trapping it in the gut. An increasing number of foods are being fortified with phytosterols; examples include margarines, yogurt, orange juice, and rice milk. Natural sources include corn, soy, and wheat. However, for persons who need to lower their cholesterol and want a safe, more natural alternative to drugs, the phytosterol levels found in fortified foods may be more effective than those attainable from natural sources.

Soy protein

Soy protein found in natural soy foods is shown in clinical trials to reduce cholesterol and risk of heart disease. Because soy has other healthy components like isoflavones and lignans, it’s advisable to include whole soy foods in your diet over foods supplemented with soy protein. These other soy components may contribute to bone health and immune function, as well as menopausal health for women.

Prebiotics and probiotics

Probiotics—Lactobacilli and Bifidobacteria—Probiotics are the healthful bacteria that reside in our intestinal tract. Natural food sources are mainly fermented dairy like yogurt and kefir. Human population research suggests diets rich in fermented dairy may lower cholesterol and cancer risk. Clinical trials show probiotics maintain gut function and health by preventing overgrowth of harmful intestinal bacteria. Because good immunity depends on a healthy gut, probiotics also aid our immune defenses.

Prebiotics—Inulin, Polydextrose, and Fructo-oligosaccharides (FOS)—Prebiotics are carbohydrates in food that our body cannot digest or absorb. Food sources include whole grains, some fruits, onions, garlic, leeks, honey, and fortified foods and beverages. As they pass through our digestive tract probiotics feed on them. Therefore, prebiotics are the food that keeps beneficial probiotic populations adequate and healthy. This in turn may improve intestinal health and nutrient absorption.

Fiber

Fiber is only found in plants, but more and more foods are being fortified with what scientists call “functional fibers” such as maltodextrins, polydextrose, beta glucans, inulin, and cellulose. These isolated fiber components may not confer all the same benefits of total or complete fiber from natural whole foods. Some benefits of fiber-rich diets include reduced risk of heart disease and cancer, and maintenance of a healthy digestive tract and blood glucose levels. Clinical trials show that soluble fiber rich in beta glucans and found in foods like oats and barley, lowers cholesterol by binding it in the intestine.

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