

Nature's Superfoods

You hear a lot these days about “superfoods” that promise to boost vitality, improve mood, increase libido, burn fat, lengthen your life, and turn you into a millionaire. Okay, maybe they don’t make that last claim, but just about. I’m talking about protein powders, green drinks, energy bars, sports goo, bee pollen, maca root, açai berries, and all kinds of other stuff you’ve probably never heard of, or if you have heard of it, you have no idea what it is.

In some cases, I think these products make legitimate claims. Maca root does have a history of medicinal use (primarily to increase libido and improve sperm quality) in South America, where it is native. However, it contains glucosinolates, which in combination with a diet low in iodine, can cause thyroid problems. It suppresses the function of the thyroid gland by interfering with iodine uptake, possibly leading to the development of a swelling of the thyroid gland called a goiter.

This single example highlights one of the problems I have with most so-called “superfoods.” In general, they are one of the following:

- Powerful botanicals (herbal medicine) that can cause potentially serious side effects and complications when used improperly.
- Highly processed and refined isolated nutrients that don’t share the beneficial qualities of the whole food they were extracted from (protein powder falls into this category, in my opinion).
- Surrounded by misinformation and misconceptions. For example, vegetarians and vegans have been led to believe that spirulina and brewer’s yeast contain vitamin B12, a nutrient that both populations are often deficient in. But spirulina and brewer’s yeast contain B12 analogs called cobamides, which actually block the uptake and absorption of true B12.

You might not be surprised, then, to learn that I’m not generally a fan of these superfoods. Some of them, like protein powder and spirulina, probably won’t hurt when used in moderate amounts in the context of an overall nutrient-dense diet. This is especially true for bodybuilders who are trying to put on significant amounts of muscle and are having trouble getting enough protein in their diets.

However, I am a big fan of nature’s own superfoods, and I believe they should be incorporated into every diet. Another way of thinking of them is as nature’s

multivitamins. These are the foods that are densely packed with micronutrients that fuel all of our cellular machinery, keeping us healthy and strong.

NATURE'S SUPERFOODS INCLUDE

- **Organ meats.** Organ meats, or offal, have fallen out of favor, but in most traditional cultures, they are the prized part of the animal. In fact, some traditional peoples throw the muscle meat (like steak) to the dogs. Why? Because the organs are by far the most nutrient-dense part of the animal—and among the most nutrient-dense foods on the planet. People typically think of fruits and vegetables when they think of antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals. But liver has more of each of these micronutrients than blueberries and kale, with the exception of calcium and vitamin C.
- **Eggs.** Eggs are one of the most nutrient-dense foods available. One egg provides 13 essential nutrients, all in the yolk (contrary to popular belief, the yolk is far more nutritious than the white). There's no reason to limit your consumption of eggs to three or four a week, as we've been told to do for years. In 2015, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee finally admitted that there is no connection between dietary cholesterol and heart disease and no longer suggests restriction of cholesterol in the diet.
- **Cold-water, oily fish.** Salmon, mackerel, herring, and sardines fall into this category. Cold-water fish are great sources of the long-chain omega-3 fatty acids EPA & DHA, which are anti-inflammatory and have been shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. They're also the only significant food source of vitamin D, which, as you've probably heard by now, plays several important roles in the body. I recommend eating a total of one pound (16 oz.) of fatty fish per week.
- **Traditional fats.** Including ghee, butter, coconut oil, palm oil, lard, tallow, duck fat, olive (fruit and oil), and avocados. These natural fats form the core structural fats in the body and are the primary energy storage form of humans. They can be eaten liberally and should comprise the majority of your calories from fat. The highly saturated fats (ghee, coconut, palm, and tallow) should be used for cooking, because they're more stable at higher temperatures and have a higher smoke point.
- **Pastured, full-fat dairy (preferably raw).** Presuming you tolerate them, full-fat dairy products are a healthy food. They contain the fat soluble vitamins A, D, and K2; minerals like calcium and phosphorus; trace elements; beneficial bacteria like Lactobacillus; long-chain saturated fat; and a natural trans fat called

conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). CLA doesn't have the harmful properties of artificial trans fats. Recommended intake for dairy varies widely based on your circumstances and goals, but 8 ounces total of yogurt, kefir, cream, sour cream, and other full-fat dairy products per day is a reasonable target.

- **Bone broths.** Bone broth is rich in glycine, an amino acid that balances the other amino acids found in muscle meats and egg yolks, and can improve mood and digestive function. Stock contains minerals in a form the body can absorb easily—not just calcium, but also magnesium, phosphorus, silicon, sulfur, and trace minerals. Broth has a long history of use as a medicinal food in almost all cultures, including our own. Your grandmother knew best! I recommend consuming 1/2 to 1 cup of bone broth per day in the form of soups, stock, stews, or sauces (bone broth makes an excellent base for a sauce or stew).
- **Meat on the bone or tougher cuts of meat.** Meat on the bone is a superfood for the same reason bone broth is: it contains collagen and glycine, which have beneficial effects on mood, digestive function, and joint health.
- **Dark, leafy greens.** These include kale, collards, spinach, mustard greens, dandelion greens, arugula, and chard. They are good sources of many vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. But you can't absorb these nutrients without dietary fat, so make sure to eat them with butter or other fats. A cup of dark leafy greens a few times a week is recommended.
- **Fermented foods.** These include fermented vegetables like sauerkraut and kimchi; fermented dairy like yogurt, kefir, sour cream, and cheese; and fermented beverages like beet kvaas and kombucha. Fermented foods have beneficial effects on digestion and the immune system (75% of our immune system is in the gut!). I suggest consuming some fermented food daily.

The good news is, if you eat these natural superfoods on a regular basis, you'll be so well-nourished, energetic, and healthy that you'll have no need for the newfangled, sometimes highly processed "miracle foods" touted by food retailers. And the best part is, many of them (especially organ meats and bone broths) are cheap and can be easily made at home. I do recommend buying organic, grass-fed organ meats and animal products when possible.