

HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

Can someone please tell me why I'm eating this kale?

By FUAD AL QUDSI

WHETHER YOU'RE purchasing fresh strawberries at the farmers market, or checking out the produce at Earthbound Farms, odds are good that you've heard some of our local bounty referred to as "superfoods" — a term often used interchangeably with anti-inflammatory foods.

What do those terms mean? Superfoods aren't anything scientific — the word is just an informal term to refer to things that pack a wallop of vitamins and other nutrients, like the nearly inescapable kale. But an anti-inflammatory is something more specific, and to understand what, it helps to understand inflammation.

It may be surprising that some inflammation can be good — a mechanism to help people heal. However, its helpfulness

depends on whether it's acute or chronic. Acute inflammation is what healthcare professionals call "the good kind."

Think about getting a cut or breaking a bone. The redness, tenderness and swelling indicate acute inflammation at work, as the body sends blood, with oxygen and white blood cells, to the injured area to prevent infection and begin the healing process. Acute inflammation is so named because it is a short-term mechanism that goes away when healing is complete.

Then there's chronic inflammation — the type to be concerned about, not only because chronic inflammation occurs over months, years or even decades, but because it happens internally and is not nearly as obvious as acute inflammation.

It's dangerous because its presence causes the production of free radicals — harmful substances that damage cells, tissues and organs as they move throughout the body. If there is enough damage, chronic diseases like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, some cancers and even early-onset dementia can occur. As people age, their bodies' cells become less resilient, increasing the risk of chronic illness.

Delicious do's

Inflammation — and free radicals — can come from poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking, drinking alcohol and environmental factors like poor air quality. As scary as all of this sounds, it's possible to prevent and even fix chronic inflammation

and lower the risk of disease. This is where an anti-inflammatory diet, high in (but not exclusively consisting of) antioxidants, comes in. Antioxidants are compounds that fight inflammation by neutralizing and eliminating free radicals that damage cells.

They're found in foods that contain mono- and polyunsaturated fats, including omega-3s, along with vitamin E, vitamin C, selenium, manganese and beta carotene. Here are the most common foods found in an anti-inflammatory diet:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Beans, peas, and lentils
- Avocados
- Nuts and seeds

SUPERFOODS *cont. on page 40A*



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HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

SUPERFOODS *cont. from page 32A*

- Cooking oil such as olive or canola
- Salmon and other fatty fish

Many of these foods come from plants, and it's been proven that a diet with lots of plants is associated with better health and longer lifespan, specifically because of these properties. Salmon and fatty fish contain omega-3s, an essential type of antioxidant and fat that the body cannot make it on its own — it has to come from food. Omega-3s have also been shown to improve brain and heart health.

Moderation is key

Of course, for every roster of healthy foods, there's always a corresponding list of things to avoid, like First, avoid foods that promote chronic inflammation, includ-

ing excess sugar, saturated fat and/or trans-fats. You don't have to avoid them completely, but try to enjoy these less often:

- High-fat meats such as hot dogs and highly marbled beef and pork
- Deep-fried foods
- Baked foods and pastries
- Full-fat dairy
- Added sugars
- Alcohol

The compounds that give carrots their rich orange color or blueberries their beautiful purplish hue are antioxidants. Each pigment represents a different antioxidant with a different function in the body. That's why dietitians encourage people to "eat the rainbow" and consume all colors of fruits and vegetables to get a range of antioxidants. Also, try to make no more than 25 percent of your plate animal protein and

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the other 75 percent plants.

The bottom line? No one "superfood" can improve health. We need a variety of anti-inflammatory foods in the diet to fight chronic illness. But simply having an anti-inflammatory diet doesn't cancel out things like such as smoking, drinking and a lack of exercise. Talk to a registered dietitian or your doctor for specific recommendations on an antioxidant-rich eating plan.

Fuad Al Qudsi is a registered dietitian with a bachelor's degree in human nutrition and food science.



Fuad Al Qudsi



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