

Health Boosting
By Michele Sadler

Oily fish prevents heart disease... broccoli and cabbage may keep cancer at bay... cheese wards off tooth decay. These fascinating recent findings are part of a new positive emphasis in nutrition research.

Doctors and scientists are beginning to isolate properties in individual foods which appear to be able to keep specific diseases at bay. In theory, this should make it easier for doctors and dietician to match diets to individuals.

Using the latest research as a guide, we isolated 10 top foods which are strongly considered to have specific disease- preventing benefits. Eating moderate amounts of these foods regularly should boost your wellbeing.

Tomatoes

Why? Possible protection against heart disease, cancer and other "degenerative" conditions.

Tomatoes contain plentiful amounts of vitamin C and carotenoids which, with vitamin A, are known as 'antioxidant' nutrients. These play a vital role in neutralizing unstable molecules known as 'free radicals', produced in the body as a by-product of the 'oxidation' of food to release energy, which can attack and damage body cells. Free-radical activity has been suspected of causing many serious health problems: heart disease, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, cataract and even aging.

Eating Tips: the World Health Organization recommends eating 5 portions of fruit and/or vegetables a day

Alternatives: carrots, citrus fruits, green leafy vegetables.

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Cheese

Why? May prevent tooth decay

Recent research in Australia and Canada suggests that ending a meal with cheese may reduce dental decay and may even encourage replacement of eroded enamel. These benefits have been observed with small cubes of cheese eaten four times a day after meals.

Eating Tips: hard cheese like Cheddar is best

Alternative: yoghurt

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Mackerel

Why? May help prevent heart disease and may reduce the risk of cancer, arthritis, psoriasis and pre-eclampsia.

Oily fish, particularly mackerel, is about the only dietary source of two special polyunsaturated fatty acids- eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) - which have wide ranging effects on the body. These fatty acids of which mackerel is one of the richest sources, are thought to promote balance of blood fats and reduce the risk of clotting- a major factor in heart attacks.

Alternative: snoek sardines.

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Spinach

Why? Protects pregnant women against a form of anemia and un-born babies against neural tube defects, such as spina bifida.

Spinach is an excellent source of the B vitamin folic acid, which is needed by rapidly dividing cells and is therefore important for pregnant women and those hoping to conceive.

Eating Tips: add raw spinach to salads and sandwiches; use in vegetable soups and curries.

Alternative: water cress, oranges, potatoes, peas, beans, melon.

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Bananas

Why? Boost and maintain energy levels and may also help prevent high blood pressure, blood clots and muscle cramps.

Bananas are rich in carbohydrate and natural sugars which are not damaging to teeth, making them an ideal package of easily digested, long lasting energy. They are also rich in potassium, an 'electrolyte' which performs many vital functions in the body, including maintaining muscle tone and kidney function.

Eating Tips: eating a banana an hour before an exercise session is ideal for

boosting energy levels. It is also a good way to replace energy and potassium after strenuous activity

Alternative: Any fruit and vegetables.

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Peanuts

Why? Help to maintain favorable balance of food fats and so reduce risk of high cholesterol

Peanuts, or ground nuts, are high in monounsaturated fats which, unlike saturated fats, do not raise blood cholesterol levels, and are now being recommended by nutritionists as part of the dietary fat allowance. Unlike many other snack foods, peanuts do not harm your teeth and are a rich source of many nutrients.

Alternative: Hazel Nuts

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Red Kidney Beans

Why? Help to maintain stable blood sugar levels

Eating Tips: aim to eat legumes three or four times a week. Raw dried red kidney beans should be soaked overnight, rinsed, and brought to a fast boil for at least 10 minutes.

Alternative: butter beans, peas, chick peas, lentils, white beans.

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Yoghurt

Why? Live cultures may boost immune function and may protect against infection and the effects of stress.

Yoghurt is a fermented milk product, rich in protein, Vitamin B and Calcium, with exciting potential for health protection.

Eating Tips: yoghurt should be eaten daily by all age groups. Serve yoghurt with cereal for breakfast; as a snack or dessert.