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Antioxidant Allies Abound: Where to Look, Surprising Food Sources

By Linda Antinoro, J.D., R.D.

The allure of antioxidants—those hot-shot defenders against attacks by menacing free radicals—faded somewhat when recent research indicated they might not be all they were stacked up to be. But while the tide may be turning against high doses of antioxidant supplements—like vitamins C and E and beta-carotene—enthusiasm for antioxidant-laden foods has not dimmed. *EN* takes a fresh look at edible antioxidants and reveals some unexpected sources.

Friend and Foe? Because antioxidants work by squelching the effects of oxidation (namely free radicals), experts have theorized that they might help thwart chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease. To date, however, only the famed Age-Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS) has provided proof positive. In the large, six-year study, high-dose supplements of vitamins C and E, selenium and zinc delayed progression of existing age-related macular degeneration. For other diseases, proof has proved elusive.

Some antioxidant researchers suggest that a negative or neutral study may simply indicate that antioxidants work best in people who are healthy, not to treat or cure those with disease. However, last year's findings from the Women's Health Study challenge even this supposition. In a recent analysis of the ongoing study's data, Harvard researchers found no difference in heart disease, stroke or cancer rates among healthy women taking 600 International Units of vitamin E or a placebo.

Beside the notion that antioxidants may be simply neutral lies the uneasy realization that they could wreak havoc with medical treatment.

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Boost Your Antioxidants One Day's Suggested Menu

BREAKFAST:

Hot coffee
Orange juice
Low-fat yogurt topped with whole-grain cereal, sunflower seeds and blueberries

LUNCH:

Mexican Lasagna (alternating layers of corn tortillas with corn, beans, low-fat cheese and tomato sauce)
Green beans
Brewed black tea, iced or hot
Strawberries

SNACK:

Popcorn

DINNER:

Baked oregano salmon
Pasta primavera with artichoke hearts
Broccoli
Grape juice

SNACK:

Hot green tea
Banana

In fact, a report in a recent American Cancer Society journal discourages cancer patients who are receiving radiation or chemotherapy treatment from taking antioxidant supplements. Why? Experts fear that large doses of antioxidants may actually feed cancers, because cancer cells thrive on the same nutrients as other cells.

In a similar vein, another study found that antioxidant supplements (vitamins C or E, beta-carotene or selenium) can interfere with the cholesterol-lowering ability of the statin drug *Zocor*.

Renewed Focus on Food. So where did the antioxidant story go awry? Ironically, the original evidence suggesting antioxidants' protective promise came from studies of food intake. But in researchers' zeal to identify the exact beneficial components in foods, studies began to focus on specific nutrients and phytonutrients, which meshed well with our willingness to swallow pills rather than balance our diets. Researchers are now realizing that this approach was shortsighted.

"Isolating individual compounds is not the way to go; whole foods are better," says antioxidant researcher Joe Vinson, Ph.D., of the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. Why? There are literally thousands of compounds in food that can act as antioxidants. Besides being too numerous to isolate, antioxidants are thought to work best in concert, the way they occur naturally in food.

Variety is Key. Still, the antioxidant message needs some fine-tuning. Just because a food proves antioxidant-rich in the lab doesn't mean your body can absorb all its antioxidants. Whether you eat a food fresh, frozen, processed or cooked can affect the levels of antioxidants present. It can increase availability, for example as cooking does with the beta-carotene in carrots and the lycopene in tomatoes.

The solution is to get your antioxidants from a variety of sources, both cooked and fresh. Some of the foods richest in antioxidants are fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds.

What rates highest? Scores depend on the analysis method used, but high on any list are berries. Wild blueberries are the overall winner, thanks to anthocyanins, the pigment that gives them their midnight-blue hue. But blackberries, raspberries, strawberries and others all have antioxidant appeal and are as healthful as they are tasty.

To complement top antioxidant picks, here are a few you might not think of as antioxidant sources, from A to Tea:

Artichokes—A recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture has named artichokes as one of the top antioxidant-containing vegetables. Artichoke extract has demonstrated a strong antioxidant effect in rats; perhaps it has the same effect in humans. Artichoke hearts in cans or jars can help you extend their season.

Beans—Recent research shows that beans of all sizes and colors are among your best bets for disease-fighting antioxidants, courtesy of flavonoids, the compounds responsible for a bean's color. Red beans top the list. A cup of cooked red beans contains as many flavonoids as a

glass of red wine. Kidney, pinto and black beans are also rich in antioxidants.

Coffee—Recent headlines trumpeted the news that your morning mug o' joe was the number one source of antioxidants in the American diet. However, "this is only because we drink so much coffee," says Scranton's Vinson. He suggests we'd be better off if we shifted our antioxidant choices more toward foods—especially produce.

Oregano—A Norwegian study recently analyzed a dozen culinary herbs and ranked oregano number one in antioxidant power. An analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that just one tablespoon of fresh oregano equals the antioxidant activity of a medium apple. Other herbs rich in antioxidants include cinnamon, curry, dill, ginger and rosemary.

While, ounce-for-ounce, some herbs have more antioxidant activity than many fruits and vegetables, it's important to realize that you don't typically eat herbs in such large quantities. But that doesn't mean you can't eat more. A spoonful of spice or handful of herbs in your food can make a significant antioxidant contribution to your diet.

Black Tea—Though green tea often garners the headlines, black—and even white and oolong teas—are also rich in powerful antioxidants called polyphenols. However, don't rely on decaf tea or bottled or instant powdered iced teas; they provide fewer antioxidants.

EN's Take. To get enough antioxidants, strive to eat nine servings of fruits and vegetables daily. That may sound daunting, but you can count juices, canned fruit, frozen veggies and dried fruit in addition to fresh produce. Be sure to eat a wide array of fruits and vegetables to get the most antioxidants. And opt for beans more often, spice up your meals, drink tea daily and don't feel you have to give up your morning java—just don't rely on it for your antioxidants. See *EN's* menu, above, for just one example of how to combine antioxidant-rich choices.

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