

# Top Foods for a Long Life

**E**ating right can increase your chances of staying healthy to a ripe old age. And I believe an anti-inflammatory diet is one key to longevity, because inappropriate inflammation sets the stage for most chronic diseases, including cardiovascular problems and Alzheimer's. This diet is also antioxidant-rich, which may counteract oxidative damage linked to the changes of aging. Here are my recommendations on how to eat to live long and well.

**Select healthy fats.** One of the most important steps in reducing inflammation is to eat more omega-3 fatty acids, which may reduce your risk of a heart attack and help prevent Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Get them by eating wild salmon, black cod, sardines, and omega-3 fortified eggs. It's also essential to limit your consumption of omega-6 fatty acids. These pro-inflammatory fats are found in safflower, sunflower, corn, and, most noteworthy, soy oils. The easiest way to cut down on them is to reduce or eliminate processed, manufactured, and fast food, including snack foods like chips. Use extra-virgin olive oil for cooking, and banish trans fats from your diet.

**Choose slow-digesting carbs.** Increase your intake of whole grains, beans, and root vegetables, including sweet potatoes, turnips, and beets, all of which have a low glycemic load. The blood-sugar spikes caused by quickly digested, processed carbs increase your risk of insulin resistance and may accelerate the aging process. I believe high levels of sugar in the blood interact with proteins to produce toxic compounds called advanced glycation end products or AGEs, which trigger inflammation and damage cellular structures.

## Cut Calories, Add Years?

Researchers have long known that a very-low-calorie diet lengthens the lives of fruit flies and mice. The same may hold true for humans, says a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (April 5, 2006). The trial involved 48 overweight people. After six months, those who cut caloric intake by 25 percent and ate as little as 1,550 calories a day had reduced fasting insulin levels, a lower body temperature, and reduced DNA damage compared to people on a weight-maintenance diet. All three changes are linked to longevity. Meanwhile, scientists at Harvard Medical School announced in September that the stress of caloric restriction appears to rev up two genes, SIRT3 and SIRT4 (members of the same family as the gene that responds to resveratrol), which make enzymes for mitochondria, the power stations of cells. This process seems to slow cell aging.

**MY TAKE** ▶ These results, though intriguing, don't change my mind about caloric restriction: The difficulties of slashing calories severely (frequent hunger and feeling deprived) aren't worth it, since there's no guarantee that it will extend your life. I do, however, think modest calorie cuts—a few hundred a day—can be beneficial for health.

**Eat the rainbow.** Consume an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables filled with disease-fighting antioxidants. I like the approach of David Heber, MD, PhD, director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *What Color Is Your Diet?* (Regan Books, 2002). He recommends eating as many colors as you can each day, from red raspberries to orange pumpkin to green arugula. "It's important to get a variety of phytonutrients," Dr. Heber says. "Our bodies evolved to expect these substances in our diet."

**Sample a range of berries.** It's worth singling out these fruits for their potent antioxidants. Blueberries pack a polyphenol punch, but don't limit yourself to one berry variety. Dr. Heber says to snack on raspberries and blackberries, and sip pomegranate juice, which contains more antioxidants than any other berry (yes, to botanists a pomegranate fruit is a berry). One small study found that people with coronary heart disease who drank pomegranate juice daily for three months experienced increased blood flow to the heart (*American Journal of Cardiology*, September 2005). As an added bonus, berries help keep blood sugar stable.

**Cook up leafy greens.** These vegetables deserve a daily spot on your plate to protect your eyes and bones. Collards, kale, and turnip greens are excellent sources of lutein and zeaxanthin, carotenoids that may protect against macular degeneration. Leafy greens also contain calcium and vitamin K, two nutrients important for bone health.

**Drink to youth.** Sip four cups of white, green, or oolong tea daily; they contain EGCG, a powerful antioxidant. You've probably heard the news about resveratrol, a compound in red-wine grapes that allowed lab mice to live longer and avoid health problems typically caused by weight gain. Humans can't get comparable amounts of resveratrol by consuming red wine or grapes, and the jury is still out on the safety and effectiveness of supplements. But if you already consume alcohol, a daily glass of red wine is a healthy choice for its heart-protective polyphenols.

**Nibble on nuts.** Dr. Heber says a handful of tree nuts may be the perfect snack for a long life. Researchers at Loma Linda University found nuts stave off hunger without causing weight gain, despite their fattening reputation. In addition, tree nuts offer some of the beneficial phytonutrients also found in fruits and vegetables. For example, the green flesh of pistachios provides lutein, the bitter skin of walnuts contains the ellagitannins also found in pomegranates, and the brown skin of almonds is rich in polyphenols also found in citrus fruits. Studies show that eating nuts can lower LDL cholesterol, and pistachios and almonds may further protect your heart by slowing the absorption of sugar into your blood if eaten after a high-carbohydrate meal. **SP**