

Diets need superfoods

Superfoods – three of the best

Here's the scoop on three superfoods you should definitely be including in your regular diet. Let's start with a refreshing cup of green tea.

By SHANE HEATON

GREEN TEA

Green tea (*Camellia sinensis*) is made from the dried leaves of an evergreen shrub native to Asia. Chinese legend has it that the Emperor Sh'eng Nung took the first sip of tea about 2737BC when some leaves accidentally blew into his cooking pot, and since then tea has become the most popular beverage in the world after water.

Archaeological evidence suggests tea leaves steeped in boiling water were consumed by *Homo erectus pekinensis* more than 500,000 years ago.

Contrary to popular belief, green tea is actually exactly the same plant as normal, black tea and does contain caffeine. The difference is that green tea is made from only the leaf bud and the top two leaves, which are lightly steamed to preserve them without destroying the beneficial compounds in the plant, while black tea has been fermented.

For centuries the Chinese have extolled the health benefits of green tea, and now scientific research is endorsing their claims. Rich in antioxidant flavonoids, glycosides, and polyphenols, green tea is much more than a refreshing drink.

Author of *Green Tea – Good Health in Your Cup*, Diana Rosen, says: "Tea is a retreat in a cup. Give it time and it can give you greater clarity of thought and a clearer sense of purpose. You can get lost in tea. You can find yourself in tea. In fact, tea can change your life."

While I can't guarantee it will change your life, green tea is a great natural stimulant with many other health benefits too.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Considering the many other health benefits of green tea, in moderation (no more than about four cups a day) it is a useful natural stimulant. This stimulant effect is due to the caffeine content, although green tea contains only 20-30 milligrams of caffeine per cup, compared to 50mg in a regular cup of tea and 100mg in a regular cup of coffee.

It is thus less stimulating, even relaxing to many people. In fact, Asian monks have traditionally used it to help keep them awake, though still calm, during meditation practice. This combination of stimulation and relaxation may be the key to green tea's ability to improve your stress tolerance.

It is an ideal alternative to regular black tea and coffee, which disrupt blood sugar balance, rob the body of nutrients and can result in dependency, all adding to the stress on your mind and body instead of lowering it.

STRONGER IMMUNITY: Beneficial compounds in green tea boost immunity and have proven anti-cancer properties even more powerful than vitamins C and E. Some believe green tea

consumption averaging three cups a day explains the relatively low rate of cancer in Japan. These compounds, especially flavanoids and glycosides, protect the body from damage caused by oxidants, and thus support the immune system and can slow down the ageing process.

On top of all this, green tea has been shown to lower cholesterol and blood pressure, increase HDL (the "good" cholesterol), thin the blood, reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke, prevent dental caries and aid weight loss by encouraging the body to burn fat. Maybe it can change your life.

HOW MUCH TO DRINK?: You can drink two to eight cups of green tea daily steeped to taste, although be aware green tea is generally steeped for only two minutes or so; longer than this makes the tea more bitter.

I recommend taking Rosen's advice to try and relax over your cup of green tea.

"Tea requires time," she says. "If you give enough quality time to tea, it will reward you with more than you ever imagined. It's just you, your thoughts and the magic of your bowl of tea."

BLUEBERRIES:

The blueberry of the genus *Vaccinium* is one of the few fruits native to North America. For centuries, blueberries were gathered in the forests by Native Americans and consumed fresh or dried. Native American tribes revered blueberries and much folklore developed around them.

The blossom end of each berry, the calyx, forms the shape of a perfect five-pointed star. Elders of the tribe would tell of how the Great Spirit sent "star berries" to relieve the children's hunger during a famine.

Parts of the blueberry plant were also used as medicine. A tea made from leaves of the plant was thought to be good for the blood. Blueberry juice was used to treat coughs. The juice also made an excellent dye for baskets and cloth.

In food preparation, dried blueberries were added to stews, soups and meats. Blueberries were also used for medicinal purposes, along with the leaves and roots.

Today we can buy fresh or frozen blueberries, blueberry jams, blueberry juice, blueberry muffins and more, and you should have blueberries in one form or another in your shopping basket every week.

WHY THEY'RE GOOD: Blueberries have been found to have one of the highest anti-oxidant values of any food in the world. Organic blueberries could be expected to contain even higher levels of antioxidants, as numerous studies have shown

organic crops tend to produce more of these compounds to help protect themselves from attack by pests and disease.

Blueberries are low in sugar. They are high in fibre. And research is constantly revealing their almost magical healing properties.

US scientists discovered feeding blueberries to laboratory rats slowed age-related loss in their mental capacity, a finding that has important implications for humans, given the ageing populations in many Western countries.

Again, the high antioxidant activity of blueberries probably played a role. Preliminary tests have shown that eating a cup of blueberries a day can significantly improve co-ordination in older people.

The chemical that appears responsible for this neuron protection, anthocyanin, also gives blueberries their colour, and might be the key component of the blueberry's antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Blueberries also contain other powerful antioxidants, including resveratrol and piceatannol.

Antioxidants, found in high concentrations in colourful fruits and vegetables, are able to subdue harmful free radicals, which can damage cell membranes and DNA through a process known as oxidative stress and are blamed for many dysfunctions and diseases associated with ageing.

At the recent American Chemical Society meeting, it was reported that a compound found in blueberries called pterostilbene has the potential to be developed into a nutraceutical for lowering cholesterol. The head researcher, Agnes Rimando, had earlier conducted studies demonstrating the cancer-fighting ability of blueberries.

HOW MUCH TO EAT?: You can get all these amazing health benefits just by eating half a cup a day of fresh or frozen blueberries. Add them to salads, toss them onto cereals or throw them into a smoothie. My two-year-old eats them like sweets.

Or try this fantastically healthy smoothie recipe: two frozen bananas, a cup of frozen blueberries, one dessertspoon of peanut butter, 300mL of soy or cow's milk (or more if you like it thinner), one dessertspoon of wheatgrass powder and/or pure cocoa powder (optional), all whizzed up in the blender. Delicious.

KALE

Kale is a green, leafy vegetable belonging to the Brassica family, a group of vegetables including cabbage and Brussels sprouts that have gained attention recently due to their health-promoting, sulfur-containing phytonutrients.

The scientific name for common kale is *Brassica oleracea*, and there are several varieties, including curly, black and blue. It's deep-green, ruffled leaves are beautiful both in the garden and on the plate.

HISTORY: Like broccoli and cauliflower, kale is a descendant of the wild cabbage, a plant thought to have originated in Asia and brought to Europe around 600BC by Celtic wanderers.

Kale played an important role in early Europe. It was a significant crop during ancient

Roman times and a popular vegetable eaten by peasants in the Middle Ages. Easy to grow, it appears in gardens today in much the same form as it did several thousand years ago.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Kale is an excellent source of vitamin C, magnesium, manganese, dietary fibre, copper, calcium, vitamin B6 and potassium. It has more betacarotene than spinach and twice as much lutein, the most of any vegetable tested.

Rich also in glucosinolates (especially indole-3-carbinol), which helps detoxify the liver, kale has one of the highest antioxidant values of any vegetable. It is especially good for boosting immunity and protecting the eyes.

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HOW TO EAT IT?: Kale is best when eaten within one or two days after purchase. The longer it is stored, the more bitter its flavour becomes and the greater the vitamin loss.

My favourite way to eat it is stir-fried with fresh garlic and ginger, then sprinkled with tamari and flax oil before serving.

Another recipe idea is to combine chopped raw kale, chilli flakes, toasted pine nuts and feta cheese with pasta drizzled with olive oil. Mix all the ingredients in with the warm pasta and let it lightly steam the greens for you.

Finally, the taste and texture of steamed kale makes it a wonderful topping for homemade pizzas.

Two final notes of caution: Kale is a fantastic vegetable but it is not for everyone. It is among a small number of foods that contain oxalates, naturally occurring substances found in plants, animals, and human beings. When oxalates become too concentrated in body fluids, they can crystallize and cause health problems.

Like all brassicas, kale also contains goitrogens, natural substances in certain foods that can interfere with the functioning of the thyroid gland. For these reasons, individuals with thyroid, kidney or gallbladder problems may want to avoid eating kale.

WHY CHOOSE ORGANIC?: Organic kale could be expected to contain even higher levels of antioxidants, as studies have shown organic crops tend to produce more of these compounds to combat attack by pests and disease.

Furthermore, most non-organic brassicas are heavily sprayed with insecticides, herbicides and fungicides, including organophosphates, anti-slug treatments, methyl bromide and paraquat. For this reason, never use the outer leaves on non-organic brassicas. ■

Shane Heaton is a qualified nutritionist and author/researcher of numerous books, including Organic Farming, Food Quality and Human Health, Stay Younger Longer, The New Optimum Nutrition Bible and Optimum Nutrition for the Mind. He is the nutrition spokesperson for the Biological Farmers of Australia. While no longer seeing clients, he runs a south-east Queensland organic home delivery company, <freshorganics.com.au>.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Shane Heaton has practiced as a nutritionist for many years and consults on organic food quality research around the world. Shane brings a wealth of experience, having consulted to one of the world's largest organic certifiers and promotional bodies, the Soil Association in the UK.

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