

Why eat ordinary food when there is something more powerful out there? Superfoods promise a lot, but do they deliver? Be wary of the buzz.

# SUPERFOODS, SUPER MYTH?

BY SHELAGH MCNALLY

Cure cancer. Burn fat. Reduce inflammation. Boost the immune system. Detoxify the blood. Strengthen the liver. Stop ageing. Balance hormones. Cure heart disease. Lower cholesterol. Superfoods promise a lot – but in most cases, it's hype.

Superfoods may have launched a thousand products and inspired an army of cookbooks, but they still have an identity problem. They're not really a food group, and no one can agree on exactly what makes up a Superfood. Is it a single item, such as the berry imported from Brazil, or is it a supplement, such as the powdered greens with 17 ingredients?

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**“Superfood is not a scientific term. Nothing has been agreed upon. It’s an arbitrary term,” says Jennifer Sugo, MSc., a registered dietitian and author of *Unmasking Superfoods*.**

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With no consensus on what Superfoods are, it's a hard industry to regulate. The EU has banned the use of the word on any of its packaging. The American Dietetic Association cautions against processed Superfoods that are "nutrient-rich." Often the body can't metabolize the immense amounts of nutrients added during processing. It's also important to read the fine print, because there are plenty loaded with sugar, fats and sodium.

Adding to the confusion are the quasi-scientific claims. Google any item considered a Superfood and you'll find a ton of information. Unfortunately, most of it appears to be anecdotal. How many of us have a friend of a friend who discovered a Superfood that changed his life? Whether it's the placebo effect or not is an ongoing debate.

A perfect example of overreaching science is with chlorophyll, a main ingredient in Organic Greens and Spirulina – both popular Superfoods. There are "well-documented" Internet sites claiming chlorophyll is able to clean our blood and promote general well-being because of its ability to mimic hemoglobin. Others claim it can cure infections and cancer, clear up skin disorders and handle heavy-metal poisoning while helping with substance addiction. If you delve into the research, you'll find that while it's true that chlorophyll does resemble heme (the oxygen-transporting part of hemoglobin in blood) the similarity ends there. Chlorophyll is a compound that helps plants create food, while hemoglobin transports oxygen around the human body. One works in sunlight, the other works in the dark. Chlorophyll can't deliver on all its miraculous curative properties because it's not built for the human body.

Sygo advises approaching any supplement or food with a long list of cures with caution. "If it's too good to

opposite of what they are intending, by luring us into thinking they can compensate for unhealthy eating.

To counteract the hype around Superfoods, most dietitians focus on the super diet, where the emphasis is on a healthy balance of whole foods, fruits and vegetables. Traditional diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, are proving to be more effective for promoting health and vitality than Superfoods.

Almonds do lower bad cholesterol, alkalize the body and nourish the nervous system, but so do pistachios, cashews, walnuts and Brazil nuts. Kale is a good source of vitamin A and C as well as carotenoids, but so are spinach, mustard greens and collard greens. Pomegranates are an antioxidant, high in Vitamin C, but so are cranberries, red currants, strawberries and guava. Spending 30 dollars on local, organic fruits

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**"The scientific research is just not there. There are small amounts of evidence that are often not based on true research. Most of the findings are low-level – what I call petri-dish evidence," says Sygo. "Remember, Superfoods is a business."**

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Getting variety doesn't necessarily mean buying expensive imports, either. Sygo does admit that part of the appeal of Superfoods is that they are exotic. As if the farther it has travelled, the more powerful it becomes – and if it's a staple of some ancient, indigenous tribe then it's guaranteed to be miraculous.

Acai went from being a fruit that some Brazilians put in their smoothies to a miracle food with anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, anti-mutagenic and antioxidant properties that induced weight loss, enhanced memory and rejuvenated the body while curing cancer and diabetes. Except for the antioxidant claim, nothing else has been proven. Researchers at the University of California found that red wine, pomegranate, Concord grape, blueberry and black cherry juice all have higher concentrations of antioxidants than acai berry juice. Most berries are rich in antioxidants – including the cheaper local

and vegetables may put you further ahead than buying that expensive imported juice or powder.

Food fads come and go, but mom had it right all along: Eat your fruits and vegetables, and cut back on the sweets. A balanced diet with variety is the key to healthy living. ☒

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**"The real Superfood is an unmodified whole food. Superfood supplements are not unhealthy, but they are expensive. If you have an unlimited budget and you are looking for that extra layer of nutrition, then go for Superfoods," says Jodi Robinson, a registered dietitian and professor of nutrition at Humber College. "Otherwise, the easiest way is to look at your plate and see if you are getting variety."**

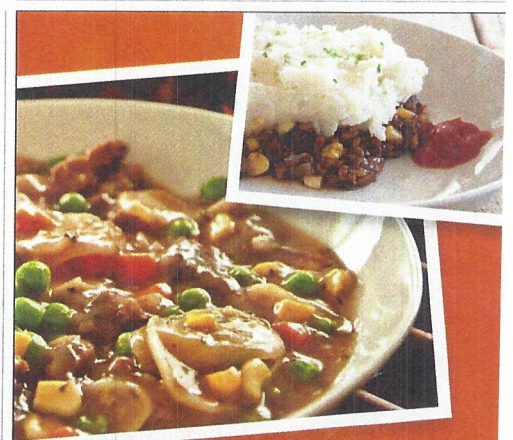
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be true, then it probably is. If a Superfood has five or six health conditions it's supposed to cure, 90 percent are not going to work," says Sygo.

Part of the allure is the promise of a magic nutritional bullet. Modern life is busy and draining, and it can be a struggle to eat properly. It's no surprise we jump at the chance to pop a pill or mix some powder into a breakfast smoothie to add an easy dose of nutrition to our day. But taken to the extreme, Superfoods may do the exact

varieties. So there's no need to spend money on acai berries from Brazil, or goji berries from Asia.

Some Superfoods do deserve the hype, but many also have a lot in common with regular foods whose nutritional value has long been recognized. Quinoa is high in magnesium, phosphorus and manganese, and delivers all nine essential amino acids – something that is rare to find in one food. However, rice and beans also deliver the same package of amino acids.



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