

The Seven Best Foods We Never Eat

Stuck in a food rut? You don't have to go far to find some overlooked food choices that are easy to prepare, pack a nutritional wallop and avoid unhealthy fats.

We asked two veteran nutritionists to help us identify seven great foods most of us skip. Our consultants: American Dietetic Association spokeswoman Cindy Moore, R.D., at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation; and Institute of Food Technologists spokeswoman Christina Stark, R.D., at Cornell University.

Avocado

The avocado is high in fat, but most is the heart-healthy monounsaturated kind. We know the avocado tastes great, but outside of an occasional guacamole dip, few of us reach for this high-fiber food for salads or as a great side dish.

You'll also get protein, a good dose of vitamins A and E, some B vitamins, lots of potassium and a dollop of copper. The rich and creamy avocado has been called the "chocolate" of fruits.

Sweet potato

At Thanksgiving, we dash for sweet potatoes as if they're available just once a year. But you can bake or microwave these tubers anytime for a super dose of vitamin A -- five times the daily value (DV) the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) uses for labeling.

Sweet potatoes also offer some vitamin C and a significant helping of important minerals, including calcium, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium and iron. And this fat-free, tasty package brightens the plate.

Soybeans

The FDA recently added soy to the list of foods that can make health claims because of its value in reducing the risk of heart disease. Soy is high in protein -- one cup of beans can fill 40 percent of the DV for protein -- and the bean also serves up generous helpings of fiber, calcium, potassium, iron, phosphorus and magnesium. How you eat this versatile food is up to you -- cooked and mixed in salads or casseroles, roasted for snacks, or as tofu, tempeh or soy milk. Soy has some fat, but very little saturated fat.

The use of soy products to treat symptoms of menopause is controversial. While it may improve symptoms for some women, the phytoestrogens (plant estrogens) that may help relieve hot flashes may also increase the risk of breast cancer.

Dried figs

Tasty as Fig Newton cookies are, figs stand on their own. They provide high-fiber, topped with some B vitamins and iron, finished off with abundant potassium and calcium. Five figs give you as much calcium as half a glass of milk.

What to do with a fig? Pop a few in your mouth, sneak them into casseroles or replace raisins in a salad.

Lentils

We never think of this legume unless it's in our soup. But put lentils in rice or casseroles and you've added one of the highest-protein, highest-fiber foods around.

A cup of lentils supplies about 40 percent of the DV for protein and about 65 percent of the DV for fiber. The lentil is high in potassium, calcium and iron, and a good source of B vitamins, phosphorus and copper. The fat content? Zero.

Kale

Dark, leafy green vegetables are an acquired taste. Maybe now's the time to see if your taste buds have matured to accommodate this no-fat, low-calorie, super-high-vitamin-A food.

One cup of kale (boiled, but not overcooked) gives you double the DV for vitamin A. You'll also get some vitamin C, a small amount of B vitamins and a generous amount of calcium. Look for kale's healthy but ignored cousins: Swiss chard, mustard greens and collards.

Barley

Here's another soup secret we tend to forget despite its claim to protein, fiber, potassium, phosphorus and iron. One cup supplies 25 percent of the DV for fiber.

Eat pearled barley as a side dish instead of rice, use it for a hearty casserole, or boil it to create a unique base for a stir-fry meal. And look at the high nutritional content of some other forgotten but powerful grains, like quinoa and amaranth.

Information courtesy of UnitedHealthcare and StayWell.