

May 2011 Newsletter



Tor Hassell's daily turbo smoothie incorporates most of the important foods mentioned below, and he especially loves operating the heavy equipment. (For smoothie tips, see pages 78-81 of Good Food, Great Medicine.)

Superfoods? Superphooey!

Making lists of superfoods is popular these days. People love reading them, too. It's much easier to talk about what we should be eating than to actually *eat* what we should be eating. **We happen to believe most minimally processed whole foods are super foods**, and some are just more super than others. Kale is clearly a more nutrient-dense vegetable than iceberg lettuce, for example. But it is worth pointing out some foods that may not be so obvious (like coffee) or popular (like sardines). Following are 7 foods that Dr. Hassell was asked to talk about in an interview with KOIN TV this month.

Coffee and tea

If someone tells you that you shouldn't drink coffee, ask to see the data. Tea and coffee with naturally-occurring caffeine appear to be part of a healthy lifestyle. (Caffeinated sodas and caramel lattes are *not!*) Researchers have found that 1 – 6 cups of coffee daily is associated with substantially less heart disease, stroke, diabetes, gallstones, and endometrial cancer, as well as fewer cases of Parkinson's disease and dementia.¹ Tea (green or black) is generally lower in caffeine than coffee, and is not only associated with less heart disease but also less osteoporosis. Of course, caffeine

doesn't suit everyone – some should avoid caffeine because of insomnia, palpitations, and so on.

Berries

Berries have a wealth of compounds that are associated with better eye health and less cancers. We strongly discourage berry extracts and supplements, which do not have evidence for benefit, as well as berry juices, which are high in calories and low in nutrients and fiber. Whole berries, on the other hand, are rich in antioxidants and fiber and low in sugar.

One juice exception is **100% pure unsweetened cranberry juice**. Most are sweetened or blended with other juices – read the ingredients! Two ounces (¼ cup) 1 – 4 times daily can help fight urinary tract infections. (Watch out - it's sour! Add it to a glass of water for a refreshing tonic.)

Most berries appear to have broad benefits but blueberries and cranberries have the best evidence. So, even if it has an exotic accent and claims to be better than other berries, it's probably just a sales pitch. Singling out any particular foods as superfoods is usually market-based rather than evidence-based (. . . except perhaps in the case of sardines, but they're not very photogenic).

Salmon and sardines

Oil-rich fish like salmon and sardines are valuable sources of omega 3 fats and protein, and are associated with lower rates of heart disease, dementia, and macular degeneration (a common cause of vision loss). Light tuna (see page 188 of *Good Food, Great Medicine*) is richer in omega 3 fats than albacore tuna. Try to include these fish in your meals a few times per week. Sardines are also a great source of calcium – if you don't buy the skinless and boneless kind. Not brave enough to eat sardines straight up? Try the Sardine Paté (on page 105 of *Good Food, Great Medicine*) or try mashing a few and sneaking them in with your tuna salad – you may not even know they're there.

Kale, collards, chard, spinach . . .

From the assertive kale to the quick-cooking spinach, dark green leafy vegetables have heroic levels of antioxidants, folate, and vitamins K and A, all working together to help protect your eyes,

¹ Ferruzzi, M. *Physiology and Behavior* 2010;100:33-41

bones and heart while lowering your risk of diabetes. Try to get into the habit of having greens every day. It's also a better way to get your folate than in the form of folic acid supplements. (See our March 2010 newsletter for more details.) Other good food sources of **folate** are asparagus, liver (yum!), lentils, and chickpeas. (All superfoods, of course.)

Tomatoes

Tomatoes have been turning up on the food lists because of their rich supply of the antioxidant lycopene, which has turned out to be protective against all kinds of cancer (as well as heart and eye disease) in repeated studies. Like so many examples of heroic whole food performances, however, researchers are suggesting that it may be the whole spectrum of nutrients in the tomato, not just the lycopene. This is part of the delicious mystery of food as medicine: the health benefits of whole foods appear to be a triumph of teamwork rather than of any one factor.

Lycopene is more available from cooked tomatoes than raw, particularly if the tomatoes are cooked in olive oil. It so happens that one of the finest dishes in the world is chopped tomatoes cooked briefly in extra-virgin olive oil and sprinkled with salt and freshly ground pepper. Soft-scramble a couple of eggs in the pan first and you have breakfast. Serve it over barely steamed baby spinach and you have a feast.

Plain yogurt and kefir

These cultured milk products are rich sources of a variety of beneficial microorganisms (probiotics), as well as calcium and protein, and are well tolerated by most of us, even many who are lactose intolerant. But when buying yogurt or kefir, choose the plain, unsweetened varieties to avoid excess sugar and to maximize the probiotic potential – like us, the good bugs appear to survive better in sugar-free environments. Flavor them yourself by adding some whole fruit or berries and a touch of raw honey. *Nancy's* is a local brand that makes great yogurt and kefir.

Dairy foods are associated with a reduced risk of obesity and diabetes in many studies. The evidence suggests that it doesn't much matter whether you choose low-fat or full-fat dairy products. In fact, higher levels of dairy fat appear to be protective against heart disease in women!² Also, eating a couple of servings of calcium-rich

dairy – or other dietary calcium sources – daily probably makes calcium supplements unnecessary.

(Dairy foods – especially full-fat dairy – get a bad rap from some quarters: we encourage more spirited debate on *all* the evidence.)

Raw nuts and seeds

Walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, pecans and other nuts are associated with lower death rates, stronger bones, less heart disease and diabetes, and lower cholesterol. Also, one recent walnut study suggested that the equivalent of a human dose of about two handfuls of walnuts daily caused a reduction in breast cancer growth in mice, and we're hoping that this will be found to apply to us, too.

Oilseeds such as flax, sesame, sunflower, and raw pumpkin seeds have similar properties as raw nuts, and you should try to include them on a daily basis. Flaxseeds should probably be ground before eating, but the other seeds can be munched as-is. Don't forget the portion control, though! Even good calories can do bad things to your waistline. Page 172 of *Good Food, Great Medicine* has a dangerously addictive recipe that includes both nuts and seeds, *Nutty Brown Rice*.

Have you hugged a sardine today?

For most of us, eating well is hard work – the result of thoughtful choices made all day every day. Plan ahead. Read ingredient labels. Know what you're eating. Eat more of the foods that don't have ingredient labels, like most of those mentioned above.

Upcoming Speaking Events

5/13/2011 – Oregon State Council of PeriOperative Nurses: Miles Hassell MD: *Chocolate & Wine: Their Role in Good Health.* Oregon Gardens, Silverton, Oregon. Conference participants only.

5/25/2011 – Providence Health Plan Employer Forum: Miles Hassell MD: *How a Greek Grandmother Would Solve the Healthcare Crisis: Which Diet and Lifestyle Choices Really Matter?* MAC Club, Portland, Oregon. Health plan employer audience only.

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

1 Thess. 5:21 (KJV)

² Warensjo, E et al. Am J Clin Nutr 2010;92:194-202