

It's Never Too Late to Improve Your Nutrition

Functional foods help maintain a healthy dietary path at any age

by Eileen Beal

Whether you are 6 or 66, food is second only to your genes in determining how long you'll live and how healthy you'll live: Eat poorly, your body and longevity suffer; eat smart, they thrive.

Eating smart means eating defensively.

The first step in eating defensively is to find out the diseases to which you are heir. To do that, dig into your family's health history for a couple of generations and make note of the diseases and conditions that show up in your family.

The next step is to use the information you get – about your grandfather's fatal heart attack at 51, your great aunt's diabetes-related death, your uncle's colon cancer, etc. – to help you reshape your eating habits so you hold those kinds of diseases and conditions at bay. “Any dietary changes that can give you an edge are going to have an impact,” says Cleveland Clinic's Director of Nutrition Therapy Cindy Moore.

One of the best ways to give yourself that “edge” is to eat more functional foods. These are foods that are “nutrient dense,” explains Moore. Functional foods are packed with the protein building-blocks and proteins, calories, vitamins, minerals, and trace elements the body needs to function on a day-to-day basis. They are also rich sources of health-promoting compounds (see below) that scientists say seem to boost the immune system's ability to fight off germs and infections and/or delay, modify or avoid many of conditions or diseases that come with aging, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, certain kinds of cancers, diabetes, bone and joint disorders, macular degeneration, and glaucoma.

Chances are you've been eating functional foods all our life. For instance, garlic helps lower cholesterol, yogurt keeps your intestinal track in good shape, tea helps prevent heart disease and cavities. But, stresses Moore, to really take advantage of their health-promoting benefits, you need to be eating *more* of them.

Benefits of functional foods

Functional foods come in three categories: natural, fortified and modified. And all are good.

The biggest one is natural and/or fresh foods. Into this category go things like yogurt (which contains friendly bacteria that promotes gastrointestinal health); brewers yeast (an excellent source of high-quality protein and B vitamins, both of which become increasingly important as you age); and as-close-to-raw-as-you-can-eat-them fruits, berries, vegetables, nuts and whole grains.

All of the latter items promote gastrointestinal health (due to the gut-cleaning roughage you get when you eat them). They also contain the greatest number and amount of health-promoting compounds, including antioxidants (compounds, such as flavonoids, that boost the immune system's ability to protect the body against damage due to wear and tear); phytochemicals (plant-based compounds, like lycopene and beta-carotene, that seem to protect against everything from cancer to cavities); and pre-biotics (compounds, such as inulin and fruit sugars that promote gastrointestinal health).

“The less processed and the more colorful these foods are, the better,” says Moore.

The next largest category is fortified foods, such as calcium-fortified juices and vitamin- and mineral-enriched breads, cereals and pastas. These foods get their function “boosted” during production when they are “fortified” with additional vitamins, minerals, trace elements and/or other compounds.

But, stresses Moore, fortified foods may not be fortified just with the good stuff. “Beware of fortified foods – such as breakfast bars and drinks – that also have a lot of sugar and empty calories,” she advises.

The smallest category of functional foods is modified foods, such as the cholesterol-lowering margarine Benecol™, or things like genetically engineered potatoes (which soak up less oil when they are turned into French fries) or genetically enhanced tomatoes (which produce more of the phytochemical lycopene, which has been shown to reduce the risk of prostate cancer *and* heart disease). “There are going to be more and more of these kinds of foods on the market,” says Moore.

The pay-off

Making the decision to eat more functional foods does have some costs. You’ll be spending more money at the grocery store – fresh foods, which have higher concentrations of functional components, are more expensive, admits Moore – and you’ll probably need to spend more time preparing them too.

But the payback on that is priceless. “This is win-win all the way. You’ll be eating foods that taste good and that do good things for your health, too,” says Moore.

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For more information on functional foods, consult:

Books

The Disease Prevention Cookbook, Clara Schneider, RN, RD

What Should I Eat: Complete Guide to the New Food Pyramid, Tershia d’Elgin

Diabetes and Heart Healthy Cookbook, American Diabetes Association

The Mediterranean Prescription Cookbook, Angelo Acquista, MD and Laurie A Vandermolen,

Web Sites

American Dietetic Association

www.eatright.org/ada/files/functionalfnp.pdf

Functional Foods List

www.med.umich.edu/mfit/nutrition/knowhow/pdfs/FuncFoodsExamples.pdf

International Food Information Council

www.ific.org/publications/factsheets/index.cfm

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