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6 Best Foods You're Not Eating

From watermelon to red cabbage, find out why these foods should be part of a healthy diet.

Some foods are so healthy they star on every nutrition expert's super food list. But often missing on those lists are some nutritional gems or underrated foods that don't get the attention they deserve.

Sorting out the best foods to eat is not always easy because the choices can be daunting. Adding to the confusion are overrated foods like salads that are perceived to be good for you but can be health horrors.

Here are six foods not typically thought of as nutritional powerhouses that can definitely upgrade your diet. Getting to know them -- and understanding more about the nutritional goodness of foods in general -- will help you to make more informed choices that can impact your health, weight, and wallet.

Criteria for the Best Foods

In order to make our best list, foods had to be whole foods that are familiar, widely available, affordable, nutrient-rich -- and most importantly, taste great. After all, what good is a super food if it isn't a culinary delight?

Beyond the obvious 'health halo' super foods like blueberries, nuts, and salmon, nutrition experts give their opinion of the best underrated foods that belong on your menus. Here are their top six picks:

1. Beans and Lentils

Make no beans about it, beans and lentils are among the most overlooked items in the grocery store. Beans really are nutrition superstars rich in protein, fiber, complex carbs, iron, magnesium, potassium, and zinc.

New York-based nutrition consultant and author of *Read It Before You Eat It*, Bonnie Taub-Dix, MA, RD says healthy foods like beans and lentils defy the recommendation to only shop the perimeter of the grocery store. “There are hundreds of essential foods like beans and lentils lining the shelves in the center aisles that should not be overlooked.”

Versatile and easy on your wallet, Taub-Dix suggests lowering the sodium in canned beans by approximately 40% by thoroughly rinsing the beans in water.

Elisa Zied, MS, RD, author of *Nutrition at Your Fingertips*, says we don't come close to eating the three cups a week recommended by the U.S. government's 2005 Dietary Guidelines. “Eating a diet rich in legumes can help promote weight loss and has been shown to lower LDL [low-density "bad" cholesterol] and raise HDL [high-density "good" cholesterol],” she says.

Toss these nuggets into soups, stews, salads, grain medleys, or greens or create a veggie dip by pureeing beans and adding your favorite seasoning, like hummus made from chickpeas.

2. Watermelon

Watermelon is everyone's favorite summertime fruit. But because it is so naturally sweet, some people avoid it because they think it is high in sugar.

Elizabeth Ward, MS, RD and author of *Expect the Best*, says watermelon should be a staple in everyone's diet. “It is fun to eat, sweet, juicy, low in calories, and chock full of vitamins C, A, potassium, and lycopene. Because it is so high in water, it helps meet fluid needs.”

A bonus is that the thick peel keeps pesticides far from the flesh, earning it a spot on the Environmental Working Groups 'clean 15' produce with least pesticide residue.

3. Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes are often thought of as high in calories and carbs because they are so naturally sweet. But don't let that fool you.

American Dietetic Association spokeswoman Heather Mangieri, MS, RD says “sweet potatoes are nutritional all-stars and one of the best vegetables you can eat. Not only are they a great source of beta carotene, vitamin C, fiber, and potassium, but this highly underrated vegetable is so versatile it can be enjoyed with very few extra calories or embellishment.”

She suggests topping a slow-baked sweet potato with a sprinkle of cinnamon, applesauce, and crushed pineapple -- or black beans and salsa. Other options: Mash it or slice into fries and oven bake until golden brown.

4. Red Cabbage

Sarasota, Fla. physician and registered dietitian Christine Gerbstadt MD, RD, votes for the cruciferous vegetable, red cabbage.

“A great source of fiber, vitamins A, D, and K; folate; and lots of trace minerals with only 22 calories in one cup chopped,” Gerbstadt says. “Rich in antioxidants, this veggie can boost cancer-fighting enzymes. You can eat it raw, cooked, sweet, savory, stand-alone in a dish like coleslaw, or add it to almost anything from soups, salads, casseroles, sandwiches, burgers, and more.”

She suggests keeping a head of red cabbage in your crisper to inspire creative ways to add more color and nutrition to your meals.

5. Canned Tomatoes

Fire-roasted petite diced tomatoes are a staple in the pantry of Georgia State University professor emeritus Chris Rosenbloom, PhD, RD. “Everyone thinks fresh is best but cooking tomatoes helps release some of the disease-fighting lycopene so it is better absorbed,” Rosenbloom says.

A study in the 2009 *Journal of Clinical Oncology* shows that a diet rich in tomatoes may help prevent prostate cancer and that lycopene, a strong antioxidant, may also help prevent other types of cancer. Of course, many other lifestyle and genetic factors also affect cancer risk.

Stock your pantry with canned tomatoes for pizza, spaghetti sauce, and home-made salsa or toss a can into soups, stews, casseroles, greens, or pasta dishes. And if your power goes out, “canned foods are a lifesaver,” Rosenbloom says.

If canned tomatoes are not your favorite, how about low-sodium vegetable juice? Miami registered dietitian Sheah Rarback, MS, RD, nominates the vegetable juice that has been around for a long time with only 140 mg sodium and an excellent source of vitamin C and potassium.

6. Plain, Nonfat Greek Yogurt

There are many yogurts on the market, and plain, nonfat Greek yogurt is a standout.

All yogurts are excellent sources of calcium, potassium, protein, zinc, and vitamins B6 and B12. What distinguishes Greek yogurt is its thicker, creamier texture because the liquid whey is strained out. Also, it contains probiotic cultures and is lower in lactose and has twice the protein content of regular yogurts.

“Skip the extra sugar calories found in most yogurts and pump up the protein by choosing Greek yogurt that contains twice as much protein, which is great for weight control because it keeps you feeling full longer,” says Judith Rodriguez,

PhD, RD, president of the American Dietetic Association and nutrition professor at University of North Florida.

Rodriguez suggests pairing the tart yogurt with the natural sweetness of fresh fruit or your favorite whole grain cereal.