

Berry Good

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Include berries in your diet because they are great sources of antioxidants and vitamins.

To most Singaporeans, fruit like strawberries and blueberries are foreign, unlike the familiar tropical fruit they grew up with.

But they would do well to make them a regular part of their diet, for berries pack a health punch far beyond their size.

They offer a wide variety of health benefits, boosting heart health and visions, and preventing cancer.

A 2007 study by the Harvard School of Public Health reported that people who ate more strawberries experienced lower blood levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), a biomarker for inflammation in the blood vessels. High levels of the protein have been linked to heart disease and stroke.

Women who ate at least two daily servings of strawberries were found to have less elevated CRP levels, compared to those who ate none. One serving of berries is 100g (about 1/2 cup).

And berries, with their bright colours and juicy bite, add a welcome tang to meals, either as toppings on salads, as a dessert, or blended in smoothies.

There are far more choices now when it comes to berry picking at supermarkets here.

According to FairPrice, the main berries available in the supermarket chain a decade ago were strawberries and blueberries. However, the selection at FairPrice Finest, its high-end supermarkets, now includes raspberries, blackberries and gooseberries, due in part to increased demand.

At Cold Storage, customers can also buy cranberries, golden raspberries and kiwiberries.

However, blueberries and strawberries are the stalwarts. Sales for these two fruit have shown a steady increase of close to 10 per cent every year, said a FairPrice spokesman.

"Berries are naturally sweet and pack an amazing amount of nutritional goodness," said Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants.

To reap maximum benefits, one should eat a wide variety of fruit, including berries, she said. General recommendations are two servings of fruit a day.

It is the vibrant colours of most berries that are characteristic of a group of antioxidants called anthocyanins, which have been shown to protect the heart, said Ms Reutens.

They improve the lining of heart arteries by increasing their production of nitric oxide, a compound that helps to improve blood flow and prevent the formation of clots, said Dr Jimmy Lim, a cardiologist at Novena Heart Centre.

Besides anthocyanins, berries also contain ellagic acid, another antioxidant, said Ms Reutens.

Ms Fahma Sunarja, a senior dietitian at Parkway Cancer Centre, said ellagic acid is thought to protect cells from free radicals, compounds which can damage cells. Damage from free radicals is believed to play a role in cancer formation.

Strawberries have some of the highest ellagic acid content among fruits, said Ms Reutens.

"When you choose berries, choose those that have a richer and deeper colour.

"Faded looking berries have lost a lot of its vitamins and antioxidants," she said.

Chinese wolfberries get thumbs-up from East and West

Berries are also held in high regard in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) - even perceived "Western" ones like strawberries and raspberries.

Ms Jin Jinhua, a consultant acupuncturist at Raffles Hospital, said strawberries are believed to support the functioning of the heart and small intestines. They also help to lubricate the lungs and strengthen the spleen.

Raspberries are said to nourish the kidneys in TCM. However, being "cooling" in nature, those with a damp constitution, that is, poor blood circulation and a weak digestive system, should avoid eating too many of them.

They may end up with worse cases of the shivers or diarrhoea, said Ms Ma Meng Yin, a senior consultant at TCM clinic IAG HealthSciences.

In TCM, "heatiness" is a concept often associated with fever, sore throats and irritability. Conversely, "cooling" foods are associated with diarrhoea and cold hands and feet.

Another berry which merits a thumbs-up from both TCM practitioners and Western health experts is the Chinese wolfberry (gouqizi).

The bright, orange-red berry helps to nourish the liver and kidneys. It also helps improve one's vision, said Ms Jin.

Ms Ma said that wolfberries are neutral foods and are suitable for most people.

However, she said that wolfberries may be too strong to be consumed alone. In Singapore's hot weather, they may worsen one's "heatiness". To alleviate this, some chrysanthemum, which is "cooling" in nature, can be added to a wolfberry brew, said Ms Ma.

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants said wolfberries contain lutein and zeaxanthin, phytochemicals known for reducing age-related macular degeneration. This condition occurs when the macula - the centre of the retina - deteriorates, resulting in blurred vision and even blindness.

Dr Jacob Cheng, an ophthalmologist at Eagle Eye Center @ Mount Alvernia Hospital, said that people with age-related macular degeneration usually do not have enough lutein in their diets, though it does not mean that eating more food with lutein will result in better vision.