

# Healthiest Foods: 40 Foods with Superpowers

You can get most, if not all, of the nutrients essential to good health by selecting the right combination of foods

By Adam Baer: May, 07, 2013

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- **Alaskan King Crab**

**Bone Builder**

High in protein and low in fat, the sweet flesh of the king crab is spiked with zinc—a whopping 7 milligrams per 3.5-ounce serving. "Zinc is an antioxidant, but more important, it helps support healthy bone mass and immune function," says Susan Bowerman, assistant director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of California at Los Angeles. "Several studies have linked adequate zinc intake to increased immunity and decreased incidences of respiratory infection." And you can reap all these benefits by swapping one of your weekly fish meals for a six-ounce serving of crab.

- **Dried Plums**

**Bone Builder**

Also known as prunes, these dark shrivelers are rich in copper and boron, both of which can help prevent osteoporosis. "They also contain a fiber called inulin, which, when broken down by intestinal bacteria, makes for a more acidic environment in the digestive tract," says Bowerman. "That, in turn, facilitates calcium absorption." Enjoy four or five a day to strengthen your bones and boost your energy.

- **Bok Choy**

**Bone Builder**

This crunchy cruciferous vegetable is more than the filler that goes with shrimp in brown sauce. "Bok choy is rich in bone-building calcium, as well as vitamins A and C, folic acid, iron, beta-carotene, and potassium," says celebrity trainer Teddy Bass. Potassium keeps your muscles and nerves in check while lowering your blood pressure, and research suggests that beta-carotene can reduce the risk of both lung and bladder cancers, as well as macular degeneration. Shoot for a cup a day.

- **Oysters**

**Bone Builder**

Shellfish, in general, is an excellent source of zinc, calcium, copper, iodine, iron, potassium, and selenium. "But the creamy flesh of oysters stands apart for its ability to elevate testosterone levels and protect against prostate cancer," says Bass. "They aren't a food most people will eat regularly, but getting five into your diet twice a week will make your weekends more fun."

- **Bananas**

**Bone Builder**

Athletes and performers are familiar with the calming effect of bananas—a result of the fruit's high concentration of tryptophan, a building block of serotonin. But their real benefit comes from potassium, an electrolyte that helps prevent the loss of calcium from the body. "Bananas also bolster the nervous system, boost immune function, and help the body metabolize protein," says Bass. "One banana packs a day's worth of potassium, and its carbohydrate content speeds recovery after strenuous exercise."

- **Kiwis**

### **Bone Builder**

Like bananas, this fuzzy fruit is high in bone-protecting potassium. "They're also rich in vitamin C and lutein, a carotenoid that can help reduce the risk of heart disease," says Bowerman. "I try to eat at least one or two a week after exercising." Freeze them for a refreshing energy kick, but don't peel the skin: It's edible and packed with nutrients.

## •**Broccoli**

### **Bone Builder**

Our president's dad may hate this cruciferous all-star, but one cup of broccoli contains a hearty dose of calcium, as well as manganese, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and iron. And that's in addition to its high concentration of vitamins—including A, C, and K—and the phytonutrient sulforaphane, which studies at Johns Hopkins University suggest has powerful anticancer properties. "One cup a day will do the trick," says Bowerman. Try cauliflower, kale, Brussels sprouts, or cabbage for variation, as all possess many of the same nutritional qualities. "Broccoli may also help reduce excess estrogen levels in the body, thanks to its indole 3-carbinol content," says celebrity trainer Gunnar Petersen.

## •**Spinach**

### **Bone Builder**

A renowned muscle builder, spinach is also rich in vitamin K, which has been shown to bolster bone-mineral density (thus protecting against osteoporosis) and reduce fracture rates. Spinach is also high in calcium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, and even selenium, which may help protect the liver and ward off Alzheimer's. One more reason to add it to your diet: A study in the *Journal of Nutrition* suggests that the carotenoid neoxanthin in spinach can kill prostate cancer cells, while the beta-carotene fights colon cancer. "Popeye was on to something," says Bowerman. "Eat one cup of cooked spinach, or two cups raw, four times a week."

## •**Leeks**

### **Bone Builder**

These scallion-like cousins of garlic and onions are packed with bone-bolstering thiamine, riboflavin, calcium, and potassium. Leeks are also rich in folic acid, a B vitamin that studies have shown to lower levels of the artery-damaging amino acid homocysteine in the blood. What's more, "Leeks can support sexual functioning and reduce the risk of prostate cancer," says Michael Dansinger, M.D., an assistant professor of medicine and an obesity researcher at Tufts–New England Medical Center, in Boston. "Chop the green part of a medium leek into thin ribbons and add it to soups, sautés, and salads as often as possible."

## •**Artichokes**

### **Bone Builder**

Lauded for centuries as an aphrodisiac, this fiber-rich plant contains more bone-building magnesium and potassium than any other vegetable. Its leaves are also rich in flavonoids and polyphenols—antioxidants that can cut the risk of stroke—and vitamin C, which helps maintain the immune system. "Eat them as often as you can," says Bowerman. Ripe ones feel heavy for their size and squeak when squeezed.

## •**Tea**

### **Immunity Booster**

Studies show that green tea—infused with the antioxidant EGCG—reduces the risk of most types of cancer. "The phytonutrients in tea also support the growth of intestinal bacteria," says Bowerman. "Specifically, they inhibit the growth of bad bacteria—*E. coli*, *Clostridium*, *Salmonella*—and leave the beneficial bacteria untouched." Why is this important? "Because up to 70 percent of your immune system is located in your digestive tract," says Bowerman. "Four cups a day will keep it functioning at its peak."

## **•Chili Peppers**

### **Immunity Booster**

"Chile's stimulate the metabolism, act as a natural blood thinner, and help release endorphins," says Petersen. Plus, they're a great way to add flavor to food without increasing fat or calorie content. Chilis are also rich in beta-carotene, which turns into vitamin A in the blood and fights infections, as well as capsaicin, which inhibits neuropeptides (chemicals that cause inflammation). A recent study in the journal *Cancer Research* found that hot peppers even have anti-prostate-cancer properties. All this from half a chili pepper (or one tablespoon of chili flakes) every day.

## **•Ginger**

### **Immunity Booster**

Contrary to popular belief, ginger—a piquant addition to so many Asian dishes— isn't a root, it's a stem, which means it contains living compounds that improve your health. Chief among them is gingerol, a cancer suppressor that studies have shown to be particularly effective against that of the colon. Chop ginger or grind it fresh and add it to soy-marinated fish or chicken as often as you can. The more you can handle, the better.

## **•Blueberries**

### **Immunity Booster**

"This potent little fruit can help prevent a range of diseases from cancer to heart disease," says Ryan Andrews, the director of research at Precision Nutrition, in Toronto, Canada. One serving (3.5 ounces) contains more antioxidants than any other fruit. Drizzle with lemon juice and mix with strawberries for a disease-fighting super snack.

## **•Cinnamon**

### **Immunity Booster**

Known for making desserts sweet and Indian food complex, cinnamon (one of the [10 best foods you're not eating](#) <sup>[4]</sup>) is rich in antioxidants that inhibit blood clotting and bacterial growth (including the bad-breath variety). "Studies also suggest that it may help stabilize blood sugar, reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes," says dietitian Nancy Clark, author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*. "What's more, it may help reduce bad cholesterol. Try half a teaspoon a day in yogurt or oatmeal."

## **•Sweet Potatoes**

### **Immunity Booster**

Often confused with yams, this tuber is one of the healthiest foods on the planet. In addition to countering the effects of secondhand smoke and preventing diabetes, sweet potatoes contain glutathione, an antioxidant that can enhance nutrient metabolism and immune-system health, as

well as protect against Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, liver disease, cystic fibrosis, HIV, cancer, heart attack, and stroke. "One sweet potato a day is a great alternative to the traditional variety," says Clark.

## • Tomatoes

### **Immunity Booster**

"I think of tomatoes as the 'fighting herpes helper' for the divorcé crowd," says Petersen. Their lycopene content can also help protect against degenerative diseases. "Cooked tomatoes and tomato paste work best," he says. Shoot for half a tomato, or 12 to 20 ounces of tomato juice, a day.

## • Figs

### **Immunity Booster**

Packed with potassium, manganese, and antioxidants, this fruit also helps support proper pH levels in the body, making it more difficult for pathogens to invade, says Petersen. Plus, the fiber in figs can lower insulin and blood-sugar levels, reducing the risk of diabetes and metabolic syndrome. Select figs with dark skins (they contain more nutrients) and eat them alone or add them to trail mix. Newman's Own fig Newtons are also a quick and easy way to boost the immune system. Aim for four figs per week.

## • Mushrooms

### **Immunity Booster**

Delicious when added to brown rice or quinoa, these mushrooms are rich in the antioxidant ergothioneine, which protects cells from abnormal growth and replication. "In short, they reduce the risk of cancer," says Bowerman, who recommends half a cup once or twice a week. "Cooking them in red wine, which contains the antioxidant resveratrol, magnifies their immunity-boosting power."

## • Pomegranates

### **Immunity Booster**

The juice from the biblical fruit of many seeds can reduce your risk of most cancers, thanks to polyphenols called ellagitannins, which give the fruit its color. In fact, a recent study at UCLA found that pomegranate juice slows the growth of prostate cancer cells by a factor of six. "Drink a cup a day," says Bowerman.

## • Quinoa

### **Muscle Enhancer**

"Move over white rice and make room for this South American grain," says Lynn Grieger, an online health, food, and fitness coach ([lynngrieger.com](http://lynngrieger.com)). Although technically a seed, this protein source contains a complete set of branch chain and essential amino acids, making it a tissue- and muscle-building powerhouse. "It's nutritional composition is better than most grains, so try to have one cup a week, alternating it with other healthy starches such as sweet potatoes and brown rice," says Bowerman. "It's a great breakfast cereal, especially when flavored with cinnamon."

## • Grass-Fed Beef

### **Muscle Enhancer**

Nothing beats pure protein when it comes to building muscle. The problem with most store-bought beef, however, is that the majority of cattle are grain fed, which gives their meat a relatively high ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids. That, in turn, contributes to inflammation. The fatty acids in grass-fed beef, on the other hand, are skewed toward the omega-3 variety. Such beef also contains conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which studies have shown help reduce belly fat and build lean muscle. "Shoot for two six- to eight-ounce lean cuts [e.g., flank or tenderloin] a week," says Bowerman. "But don't grill it. Charring is carcinogenic. Roast or pan sear."

## **•Nonfat Ricotta**

### **Muscle Enhancer**

"Men don't eat the 16 ounces of protein they need every day, and this is a great substitute if they don't like cottage cheese," says Dr. Dansinger. Made from whey, this soft cheese is rich in amino acids, which speed muscle recovery after a workout. Flavor it with jam and spread it on a cracker, or put half a cup in a blender with skim milk and fruit for a post workout cheesecake-flavored smoothie. It also tastes great on its own with olive oil and fleur de sel.

## **•Tofu**

### **Muscle Enhancer**

Made from soybeans, tofu was once the bastion of vegetarians. But the plant protein in these pressed bean curds—available firm or soft, and delicious when marinated and tossed into salads—provides a full complement of amino acids, as well as isoflavone, which helps muscles recover from exercise. "A serving is four ounces," says Andrews. "Eat one to three servings a week."

## **•Lentils**

### **Muscle Enhancer**

These flat beans don't just make delicious soups. "They're packed with protein, not to mention B vitamins and zinc, which are important for good sexual health," says Andrews. Eat half a cup twice a week, cooking them for about 30 minutes (until they start to break apart) to create a satisfying mashed-potato-like texture. "A single serving will help you cover all of your nutritional bases," adds Andrews.

## **•Eggs**

### **Muscle Enhancer**

The old school of thought was that you should eat egg whites rather than whole eggs in order to get the protein without the added cholesterol. But recent studies have proved that the fat in the yolk is important to keep you satiated, and the benefits of the minerals and nutrients in the yolk outweigh its cholesterol effect. Eggs deliver the most nutrients for the fewest calories and provide the most satiety per calorie consumed. Plus, eggs contain choline, a B vitamin that studies have linked to improved brain function. "Eat three or four servings a week for breakfast or as a protein alternative at other meals," says Bowerman.

## **•Greek-Style Yogurt**

### **Muscle Enhancer**

All yogurt provides muscle-friendly protein as well as probiotics that keep your digestive tract

healthy and your immune system in top form. "But the Greek variety is thicker than regular yogurt, so it has more protein, and it's sweeter and heartier," says Clark. "It's man-style yogurt, with a velvety texture." Mix eight ounces with fruit for breakfast, or spread it on flatbread and top with chicken and onions.

## •Quorn

### **Muscle Enhancer**

A little-known protein source, Quorn is a great substitute if you're looking to add variety to your diet with nonanimal protein. "It's composed of a compound similar to mushroom protein: mycoprotein," says Dr. Dansinger. "As such, it is top-quality protein without unhealthy animal fat. If you're a vegetarian, this should be at the top of your list." Quorn is also lower in calories than chicken and turkey, and you can buy it cubed or ground, making it an ideal substitute for ground beef. Find it at your local specialty market, and shoot for six ounces a day if you're tired of soy.

## •Chocolate Milk

### **Muscle Enhancer**

Believe it or not, the sweet brown milk you loved as a kid is actually good for you. "Chocolate milk is one of my favorite post exercise recovery drinks because it contains whey protein, which helps muscles recover and repair," says Grieger. "Plus, it tastes great while boosting calcium and vitamin D, which research shows is important for preserving cartilage and joint health." Indeed, a 2006 study in the *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism* found that it is as good as or better than Gatorade for replacing glucose in fatigued muscles. "Drinking one large glass after you work out will boost muscle growth and speed recovery," says Grieger.

## •Wild Salmon

### **Muscle Enhancer**

High in inflammation-fighting omega-3s, wild red or sockeye salmon (canned or fillet) is an excellent low-mercury alternative to canned solid tuna, which can be high in the toxic metal. "Defrosting a frozen fillet for dinner makes a great substitute for steak," says Dr. Dansinger, "or pan sear a fresh fillet with olive oil and kosher salt." Recent NFL probes suggest that many teams—including the Bengals and the Giants—serve it to players to lock in strength gains and fuel performance. But while pro athletes might eat 16 ounces at once, you're better off with three or four six-ounce servings a week.

## •Pineapples

### **Inflammation Fighter**

With its potent mix of vitamins, antioxidants, and enzymes (in particular, bromelain), pineapple is an all-body anti-inflammation cocktail. It also protects against colon cancer, arthritis, and macular degeneration, says Grieger. If only the "colada" part of the equation were as healthy. Have half a cup, two or three times a week.

## •Olive Oil

### **Inflammation Fighter**

The extra-virgin variety is rich in beneficial monounsaturated fats. "Its fatty acids and polyphenols reduce inflammation in cells and joints," says Grieger. A study in the journal *Nature* found that it's

as effective as Advil at reducing inflammation. "Have two tablespoons a day," says Bowerman. (Not a fan of olive oil? [Try one of these 3 healthy alternatives](#) [5].)

## •Bing Cherries

### **Inflammation Fighter**

Research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that eating up to 45 Bing cherries a day can lower the risk of tendinitis, bursitis, arthritis, and gout, says Bowerman. Studies also suggest that they reduce the risk of chronic diseases and metabolic syndrome. "They taste great on yogurt or cereal," says Bowerman.

## •Dark Chocolate

### **Inflammation Fighter**

"The flavonoids in dark chocolate inhibit platelet clumping, which reduces the risk for stroke, heart attack, and embolisms," says Bowerman. "It's high in calories, so limit yourself each day to a half bar with at least 70 percent cacao."

## •Turmeric

### **Inflammation Fighter**

Curcumin, the polyphenol that gives the spice its tang and yellow hue, has antitumor, antiarthritis, and anti-inflammatory properties. "Studies show that it also inhibits the growth of plaques associated with Alzheimer's," says Bowerman. Sprinkle half a tablespoon on fish or chicken to add color and flavor.

## •Wild Fatty Fish

### **Inflammation Fighter**

Mackerel and other wild fatty fish contain a hearty dose of omega-3 fatty acids, which protect the heart, cells, joints, and brain. "Stay away from farmed varieties," says Bowerman. "They contain undesirable levels of omega-6 fatty acids." The DHA and EPA in the oil of these fish also reduce the risk of colorectal cancer. Shoot for four six-ounce servings a week. "I like mine grilled with olive oil, lemon, and sea salt," notes Bowerman.

## •Flaxseed

### **Inflammation Fighter**

Rich in protein and fiber, these seeds taste great on cereal and yogurt. Their oil also comes in pill or liquid form, and is high in alpha linolenic omega-3s, which puts them next to wild fish on the list of heart-healthy fare. "They're a great brain food too," says Andrews. Shoot for a tablespoon of ground flaxseed a day.

## •Almonds

### **Inflammation Fighter**

These energy-rich snacks lower bad cholesterol, thanks to plant sterols, and benefit diabetics by lowering blood sugar. They're also rich in amino acids, which bolster testosterone levels and muscle growth. "Eat a third of a cup a day with the skins on. The skin is full of antioxidants," says Bowerman.



## • Apples

### **Inflammation Fighter**

An apple a day reduces swelling of all kinds, thanks to quercetin, a flavonoid also found in the skin of red onions. Quercetin reduces the risk of allergies, heart attack, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and prostate and lung cancers. If given the choice, opt for Red Delicious. They contain the most inflammation-fighting antioxidants.

## • Whole Grains

### **Inflammation Fighter**

Whole grains—oatmeal, wheat flour, barley, brown rice—are high in fiber, which calms inflamed tissues while keeping the heart strong and the colon healthy. Not all breads and crackers advertised as "whole grain" are the real deal. "Read the label," says Grieger. "Those that aren't whole grain can be high in fat, which increases inflammation." Try for two slices of whole-grain bread a day. (Make great meals and still stay healthy with more than 150 recipes found in the new *Guy Gourmet* <sup>[3]</sup> cookbook.)

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