Nutrition

Acai & Other Berries: Fact or Fiction?

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What’s all this I hear about acai berries? Are they really as magical as they sound?

These trendy, small Brazilian berries, claimed to be found solely in the rainforest and only recently introduced to the Northern Hemisphere, have gained much popularity due to their purported health benefits. The prevalence of products containing this so-called Super Food is truly remarkable. Acai (ah-sigh-EE) berry weight loss plans have been hyped as everything from a diet miracle to rip-off scam. Part of the allure seems to be the scarcity of the berries, which can “only” be found in the Brazilian rainforest. The advertisements for these products suggest that they have the ability to help shed pounds, flatten tummies, cleanse colons, enhance sexual desire and prevent cancer, among a long list of other things. And then there are the business opportunities – selling the product to your friends and relatives, and then letting them in on the ground floor so they, too, can become a distributor. Sound familiar? OK, now let’s get to the facts …

It is true that the acai berry comes from a species of palm tree native to Central and South America, from Belize south to Brazil and Peru, and they do grow mainly in swamps and floodplains. These berries have been used as a major food source for years in the Amazon region of Brazil. The juice and pulp are used in smoothies, on ice cream and as a flavoring for several other products, including liqueurs. Although many consumers are familiar with the concept of antioxidants neutralizing free radicals, they are often confused by various products claiming to have a superior antioxidant capacity. The answer lies in how the tests are conducted and which results are made public by the manufacturer. Results from a recent study, for example, demonstrated higher antioxidant activity in pomegranate, Concord grape, blueberry and black cherry juices when compared to acai berry juice.

Other research has shown that all edible berries, including acai, are rich in cancer-fighting chemicals known as phytochemicals. Strawberries and raspberries are particularly rich in a phytochemical called ellagic acid, which is a potent antioxidant and has been shown to help the body deactivate certain carcinogens. Blueberries contain the phenolic compounds anthocyanosides, which are among the most potent antioxidants yet discovered. Grapes and grape juice are rich sources of resveratrol, another phytochemical from the phenol family that has potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Even so, the extent to which antioxidants by themselves promote health is debatable. There’s no scientific evidence to support claims that acai berries or any other fruit juice performs any of the other commonly advertised functions.

Scientists have also found that in the world of fruits, vegetables and phytochemicals, 1+1 does not always equal 2 but may equal 3. When specific phytochemicals have been extracted from a food to study the antioxidant properties, the potency is lower than that which is found when the phytochemical is tested in the form of whole food. Eating phytochemicals in the proportion and combination nature intended seems to have a synergistic effect. Simply put, there is much greater benefit to be found in eating the whole food, such as whole berries or grapes, as opposed to taking a juice extract, powder or pill.

Eating a variety of nutrient- and phytochemical-dense fruits and veggies has a much greater impact on overall health and cancer risk reduction than taking an individual supplement. Although blueberries and raspberries may not have the sex appeal as acai berries, they pack the same punch and can put a few dollars back in your wallet. Drinking pomegranate juice or, better yet, eating pomegranates can give you more antioxidants, fiber and the added benefit of consuming fewer calories.

As a colleague of mine put it, “Acai berries are the blueberries and raspberries of South America.” My advice: Eat a rainbow of fruits and vegetables every day. Save the money you might be spending on acai berries and treat yourself to a good massage -- and a nice bowl of berries.

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