IT'S ANCIENT, SLIMY AND COULD BE YOUR KEY TO GOOD HEALTH

By Jordana Brown

When you think of algae, pond scum probably comes to mind. But believe it or not, this 3.5-billion-year-old life form may do some miraculous things. Preliminary reports claim that it can help fight cancer, AIDS and heart disease; lower cholesterol; boost the immune system; and detoxify the body. And while there may be some truth to those claims, weeding through the evidence takes some doing. But don't worry, we've done the legwork for you. Here's a brief rundown of three of the most common types of algae supplements.

blue-green

Ironically, the widely known "blue-green algae" isn't really algae at all, but bacteria—cyanobacteria. And while real algae doesn't form by-products that can be toxic to humans, cyanobacteria does, which is why you need to be somewhat careful about the type of blue-green algae supplements you buy.

Spirulina is the most popular—and the safest—type of blue-green algae. Many supplement companies grow spirulina in controlled ponds that are regularly screened for toxins. And even those that harvest it from nature are fairly well assured of having a pure product since spirulina grows best in warm, alkaline conditions that don't lend themselves to the growth of toxic microcystins.

So why should you take it? "It's a great source of complete protein, because it has all the amino acids," says Janet Little, CN. "It also contains a good spectrum of vitamins and minerals." In addition, spirulina is a vegetarian source of omega-3 fatty acids.

green

When you talk about green algae, you're generally talking about chlorella. Like spirulina, chlorella contains a wide range of amino acids, vitamins and minerals, as well as high levels of chlorophyll. Little prefers spirulina to chlorella in terms of protein because spirulina is "about 55-70 percent protein, where chlorella is only about 45 percent," but green algae has other benefits. "Chlorella helps build red blood cells," she says, "and it's a good detoxifier," meaning it helps the liver and kidneys rid the body of waste products.

Chlorella also has something else spirulina doesn't, a compound called chlorella growth factor (CGF). While there's not a lot of hard science supporting the claims, there are theories that CGF could protect and repair tissue and even slow aging.

Chlorella has one other unique property: a hard outer casing that must be broken to be absorbed by the body, so be sure to buy only those preparations that state that the cell wall has been broken.
red
Often sold under the name “red marine algae,” red algae shows enormous promise in the fight against chronic viruses. And we’re not talking your everyday cold, but powerful viruses such as the flu and herpes. “It has certain sulfur polysaccharides in it, and those help influence the behavior of viruses like herpes, shingles and Epstein-Barr,” says Little. Preliminary research is encouraging.

Another type of red algae, Irish moss, influences the thyroid. “It’s also in many diet pills or herbal bowel cleansers,” says Sally Kravich, holistic nutritionist and author of the book Vibrant Living: Creating Radiant Health and Longevity.

In general, red algae is less popular and harder to find than the other two.

how to take algae
Adding algae to your diet requires some care:
• Start slow: “If you take too much too fast, you’ll get intestinal distress,” says Little. “Begin with maybe a quarter of a tablespoon [of the powdered form] and every couple days, build up.”
• “To me, algae is something you rotate in and out for cleansing purposes, but don’t use all the time,” advises Kravich. She advocates varying the types of algae following a three-months-on, one-month-off schedule: a month of spirulina, a month of chlorella, a month of red algae, a month off, and then repeat the cycle. That way you get the benefits of the various algaes and your body doesn’t get accustomed to any one algae.
• When possible, take algae in powder, not pill, form. The powders let you control how much you’re getting. If you can only find the pill form, open the capsule to get to the powder. Another way to get your algae boost is through formulations that include other “green foods” such as barley, wheat and alfalfa grasses.
• Pregnant women and those with thyroid problems should not take algae supplements because of their high iodine content.

Ultimately, adding algae to your diet can only be a good thing, because this ancient life form can help you end up with an ultra-modern nutritional profile.
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Occupation: Stress Manager in the Adaptogen department.

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