in favor of flavonoids

Increase your intake of flavonoids—antioxidants abundant in fruits, veggies, and supplements—for antiaging benefits, help with inflammation, and more

By Jack Challem

THE BASICS: You might be surprised to learn that fruits and vegetables don’t get all their antioxidant power from vitamin C. In fact, the vast majority of these antioxidants belong to a family of compounds known as polyphenolic flavonoids. More than 5,000 flavonoids (aka bioflavonoids) have been identified in plants and tend to concentrate in fruit and vegetable skins, where they add color and protect from sun damage and insects.

ALIAS: Researchers have categorized flavonoids into several groups—including anthocyanidins, flavonols, flavones, and flavanones—because of common features in their chemical structures. However, consumers tend to recognize flavonoids by their individual names, such as Pycnogenol, resveratrol, quercetin, and grape seed extract.

HOW THEY WORK: As antioxidants, flavonoids neutralize free radicals, molecules capable of damaging cells and increasing disease risk. No single antioxidant can quench all free radicals, so it makes sense to consume a variety of flavonoids. Many flavonoids also have potent anti-inflammatory activity. Finally, flavonoids seem to regulate some genes. All in all, higher intake of flavonoids is associated with a significantly lower risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes.

HEALTH BENEFITS: Supplemental flavonoids have many important health benefits. These are some of them:

- **Pycnogenol.** The benefits of this proprietary extract of French maritime pine trees have been extensively documented in human studies. A complex of more than 40 antioxidants, Pycnogenol has potent anti-inflammatory benefits at dosages above 150 mg daily and can reduce pain stemming from osteoarthritis of the knees. Recent research has focused on its benefits in diabetes. Pycnogenol temporarily inhibits the activity of some carb-digesting enzymes and lowers blood sugar levels. Other research indicates that it can lower blood pressure.

- **Grape seed extract.** This common supplement is also a complex of naturally occurring polyphenolic flavonoids of the same category as Pycnogenol: oligomeric proanthocyanidins or OPCs. Based mostly on cell and animal experiments, grape seed extract may have benefits in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer.

- **Resveratrol.** Found in red grape skins, red wine, and Japanese knotweed, resveratrol has attracted interest because it increases SIRT1 gene and sirtuin enzyme activities, which appear to regulate metabolism and aging. In animal studies, resveratrol increased lifespan by about 15 percent. It also helped the animals maintain lower blood sugar and insulin levels.

- **Citrus flavonoids (aka citrus bioflavonoids).** Found in oranges, grapefruit, lemons, and limes, this flavonoid family has diverse benefits, according to cell and animal studies. Naringin and naringenin (found in grapefruit) may reduce oral cancer risk. Naringenin also blocks secretion of the hepatitis C virus from infected cells, which may help control the chronic infection.

- **Quercetin.** This flavonoid, found in apples and onions, may have some benefits in relieving allergies and asthma. Studies in mildly hypertensive patients have found that quercetin can lower blood pressure. Some research has found that quercetin may be helpful in treating chronic prostatitis.

- **Luteolin.** Found in celery and green pepper, this flavonoid is emerging as a potent anti-inflammatory. In recent experiments, it blocked the production of interleukin-6, a powerful promoter of inflammation. The same study suggested that luteolin may be of benefit in reducing brain inflammation, a factor in Alzheimer’s disease.
BACKGROUND CHECK:
When researchers first identified and isolated flavonoids in the 1930s, they were referred to as “vitamin P.” The P represented the “permeability” factor because a lack of dietary flavonoids led to highly permeable (or leaky) blood vessels, as evidenced by abnormal bruising. Flavonoids and vitamin C were commonly given to prevent bruising (see sidebar).

GLEANINGS: It’s best to consume a diverse supply of flavonoids. If you’re trying to resolve a health problem, add one type of flavonoid supplement. If that doesn’t help, switch to a different kind.

HEADS UP: Herbs, such as ginkgo and ginseng, contain very distinctive types of flavonoids—many of which are not found in other plants. That is likely why they have very specific benefits.

WHAT YOU SHOULD TAKE: Dosages vary depending on the type of flavonoid supplement, so follow label directions.:

Product Examples
American Health Ester-C with Citrus Bioflavonoids contains a gentle form of vitamin C.
Suitable for vegetarians, Solgar Advanced Proanthocyanidin Complex includes Pycnogenol and grape seed extracts.
Flora Health Grape Seed Extract Plus contains bioflavonoids from bilberries and cranberries.

FLAVONOIDS HEAL BRUISES AND SPIDER VEINS

At age 29, Sarah was perplexed and embarrassed by a pattern of spider veins and small varicose veins on her legs and a tendency to develop dark bruises from the slightest bumps.

The reasons became clear when she consulted a nutritionally oriented physician. Sarah was mostly eating at fast-food restaurants and rarely ate any vitamin C–rich vegetables or fruits.

The doctor recommended eating more salads and fruits, as well as other dietary improvements. He also suggested that she take a combination of vitamin C (1,000 mg) and flavonoid (1,000 mg) supplements, which are known to strengthen blood-vessel walls and reduce the risk of bruising.

Within a couple of weeks of starting those supplements, Sarah’s bruises disappeared. After several months, both the spider veins and varicose veins diminished.

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