Sound too good to be true? After all, some of these “superfood” claims aren’t just attached to newfangled juices or diet bars, but to food staples we’ve known and enjoyed forever, like sweet potatoes and nuts. So, should we radically change our way of eating—have blueberries three meals a day and drink gallons of goji berry juice? We asked area nutrition experts to weigh in on a list of these supposed miracle foods to help you separate fact from fiction.

**Flax Seeds**

According to Dr. Elizabeth Pavka, “flax seeds are a nutritional gold mine. Their protein is easily digested and contains all the amino acids needed for building a strong body.” She also notes that “the fiber in flax seeds acts like a broom, sweeping the colon of toxic material, metabolic waste and dried mucus. In addition, flax seeds support friendly intestinal bacteria that keep disease-causing organisms in check.”

But, the benefits don’t end there. “Flax seeds are the richest source of lignans, a group of naturally occurring compounds that have anti-viral, anti-bacterial, anti-fungal and anti-cancer properties. And, according to the book *Food For Fitness*, flax is a powerhouse of omega-3 essential fats: one tablespoon of flax oil contains eight grams of omega-3 oils, more than twice as much as salmon oil or cod liver oil (1).”

To incorporate flax in your diet, Dr. Pavka recommends one to three tablespoons flax seed daily. “They must be ground before being eaten, as they cannot be digested whole,” she reminds. Other tips: “Grinding your own fresh flax seeds in a small coffee grinder and eating them soon after grinding is recommended. If you purchase ground flax meal, select it only if stored in a refrigerator or cooler (or vacuum packed), because the essential fats go rancid quickly when exposed to air. When you open the bag for the first time, give it the ‘sniff test’ for any bitter odor, which means that the fats have spoiled. Do not eat it if it’s spoiled, because rancid fats are toxic to the body. Refrigerate ground flax seed for short-term storage and freeze it for long-term storage.”

**Coconut and Coconut Oil**

“In the late 1980’s, tropical oils got a bad rap. People were newly concerned with serum cholesterol levels and saturated fats. So, worried manufacturers replaced healthful palm and coconut oils in foods with harmful hydrogenated vegetable oils. But what’s the real story?” asks Dr. Liz Lipski.

“Coconut oil is 92-percent saturated fat; about 62 percent of that fat comes from medium chain triglycerides, or MCTs. The primary fats in coconut oil are lauric and capric acid, which have anti-fungal properties. MCT oils are good for us. They increase our metabolic rate, enhance athletic performance, are used in infant formulas, and have not been implicated in increased rates of heart disease. Coconut oil has also been shown to have anti-inflammatory benefits. MCT oils are also easily digestible, so they are extremely useful for people who have digestive diseases or illnesses where malabsorption is an issue—like premature babies, people with cystic fibrosis, cancer, etc. “aging” also results in many people having difficulty digesting fats or having low levels of fat-digesting enzymes, a situation where MCT oils may be of benefit. Unlike other fats, MCT oils are partially absorbed directly from the bloodstream through the portal vein and can be quickly available for cellular energy, much like carbohydrates (2).”

Dr. Lipski suggests using coconut oil as a substitute for butter or ghee or even to replace milk in recipes. The grated flesh of coconut also has a variety of uses—from homemade granola to a fresh snack on its own.
SWEET POTATOES

“Sweet potatoes are a superfood for a variety of reasons,” says Dr. Deb Love. “They are high in fiber, low in sugar and are an ‘anti-diabetic food.’ Unlike many other starchy vegetables, sweet potatoes help stabilize blood sugar levels and improve the response to the hormone insulin. Along with being high in fiber, they are rich in carotenoids and vitamins C, B6, B5 and B2, as well as manganese, copper and biotin. Sweet potatoes are also a great source of antioxidants.”

What exactly can we expect to get out of eating a sweet potato? According to Dr. Love, “a 3.5 ounce serving (100 gram) provides 90 calories, two grams of protein, 20.7 grams of carbohydrate, 3.3 grams of fiber and only 8.4 grams of sugar.”

Soya

The controversy around eating soya products can make it difficult for some to see its benefits, while others stand strong by their views of soy as a superfood.

Dr. Lipski points out the conflicting views: “Kaayla Daniel, PhD, CCN, author of The Whole Soy Story, makes the case that soy contributes to gas, bloating, hypothyroidism, infertility, cognitive decline, birth defects, heart disease, reproductive issues and cancer.”

The FDA has approved claims for soy to reduce heart disease. Other studies indicate that soy isoflavones may help prevent cancers and modify the impact of some reproductive issues (already mentioned above) and dementia. So what are we to believe?

Changes in historical uses of soy may be a possible reason for caution. “Soy products were used in small amounts as part of traditional Japanese diets in the form of miso, tofu, tempeh, soy sauce, and edamame in amounts typically less than one ounce per day,” says Dr. Lipski. “Today, many vegetarians use soy products as a replacement for meat protein, and soy is ever-present in the current American diet; soy oil, soy protein isolates, lecithin, and other soy-based additives are in well over half of processed foods. If these ingredients aren’t organic, then you can assume that the soybeans that were used were genetically engineered. Genetically engineered soy products have been shown to cause immune, hormonal and other health concerns in animals.”

So, should we look to the Japanese diet as a model? “In my own life,” says Dr. Lipski, “I occasionally eat tofu, tempeh and edamame. I enjoy miso soup and often use tamari sauce rather than salt. But, I choose legumes other than soy to cook, avoid all soy products

ALMONDS

“While almost everyone thinks of an almond as a nut, it’s actually the seed or pit of the fruit of the almond tree,” says Dr. Lorraine Parker. But even though it may not exactly be a nut, a food group touted as super, it’s still a powerful food. According to Dr. Parker, “a quarter cup of almonds contains about 205 calories, 99 milligrams of magnesium and 257 milligrams of potassium, in addition to vitamin E, manganese, copper and phosphorus. The mineral magnesium is necessary for arteries to relax. Research studies indicate that a magnesium deficiency can increase the risk of a heart attack. The mineral potassium is essential for maintaining normal blood pressure. In addition, almonds have a low glycemic index that helps reduce after-meal blood sugar and insulin surges (3).”

Also consider that parts of the almond may not possess as much superpower on their own as the whole food. “Dr. Jeffrey Blumberg, a researcher at Tufts University, found that potent antioxidant flavonoids found in almond skins plus vitamin E found in the almonds’ meat when combined together more than double the antioxidant health punch either delivers separately,” notes Dr. Parker. “The flavonoids isolated from almond skins have health benefits similar to the catechin found in green tea and the narigenin (antioxidant and anti-tumor benefits) found in grapefruit (4).”

BEYOND SUPERFOODS: WHOLE FOODS AND VARIETY ARE KEY

While the nutritionists did give many of the mentions foods a “superfood” seal of approval, they caution that superfoods alone won’t keep you fit as a fiddle. Here’s their general advice on healthy eating:

Dr. Lorraine Parker . . .

• I caution people against falling for the hype about a “miracle” superfood. Each of an estimated 75 to 100 trillion cells in the human body orchestrates thousands of biochemical reactions every minute. One superfood cannot possibly provide all the requirements humans need in order to live a long and healthy life. However, there are foods that provide “super” health benefits, and including them in a daily diet of complex carbohydrates, lean protein and healthy fats is enthusiastically recommended.

Dr. Elizabeth Pavka . . .

• Because different foods contain different amounts of nutrients, the best way to ensure that you get the nutrients needed is to eat a wide variety of foods each day.

• Eat more foods in forms closer to the way nature provides them. Consume half of your fruits and vegetables raw; they contain more nutrients than if they are cooked. Eat whole fruit rather than drinking its juice. And, eat only whole grain cereals and pastas. (Note: Raw foods can be more problematic than cooked foods for people prone to food allergies.)

• With few exceptions, the darker or brighter the color of the food, the more nutrients it contains.

• Locally grown foods score a nutritional bull’s-eye because they do not have the long lag time between harvest and table, thus maintaining more of their nutritional value.

• Each person is unique. Therefore, despite what the government tells us, no one way of eating is suitable or healthy for all people. Finding out which foods are healthiest for you is essential to your long-term health. This can be done by eliminating certain foods and then bringing them back into your diet while observing any changes. (Laboratory testing is also available to test for allergic reactions to foods.)
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that aren’t organically grown, and I don’t eat soy-based meat substitutes. I feel that soy used in this way and frequency can be part of a healthful diet.”

GOJI BERRIES

Perhaps new to many, these small berries get a lot of big hype. “Pinkish-red in color and native to Tibet and China, goji berries are about the size of raisins and can be eaten fresh or dried as a snack, used in cooking, cereal, trail mixes and smoothies. Some people describe goji berries’ taste as sweet with a slight tartness—somewhat like a cranberry, except sweeter,” says Dr. Pavka. But, do they deliver powerful nutrients? “The berries are high in iron, protein, fiber, vitamin C, vitamin E and many other nutrients, not to mention are potent in antioxidants, molecules with free radical-destroying, or cancer-fighting, properties,” she says. Other berries like raspberries and blueberries are also high in antioxidants; these berries are harvested locally, whereas goji berries currently are not.

QUINOA CONTAINS ALL ESSENTIAL AMINO ACIDS, MAKING IT A GREAT MEAT REPLACEMENT.

Whole Grains

“Whole grains include brown rice, millet, rye, wild rice, oats, corn, spelt, kamut, barley and wheat, an often problematic grain for some,” points out Dr. Love. “Wheat contains gluten, as does spelt, kamut, oats and rye. Some individuals who are sensitive to gluten can tolerate eating spelt, oats and rye. But, people with celiac disease, a genetic intolerance of wheat, need to avoid these grains.”

If you are sensitive to these grains, don’t worry; there are whole grain substitutes, including quinoa, buckwheat and amaranth, which provide many of the disease-lowering benefits of grains like wheat and rye. “Expert opinions vary on whether the grains corn and rice contain gluten. Buckwheat and quinoa offer excellent amino acid profiles for vegetarians; quinoa also contains all essential amino acids, making it a great meat replacement. All of these grain substitutes are high in fiber, are nutrient-dense and have blood sugar stabilizing properties because they are complex carbohydrates, or good carbohydrates.”

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Though Dr. Love would categorize whole grains as superfoods, she cautions against refined grains, or “inferior foods that are void of calories, rob our bodies of nutrients and lead to disease.” She recommends reading nutritional pioneer Weston A. Price’s *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*; Dr. Price discovered the devastating effects of refined foods on general health. [For more information on Dr. Price and his findings, see our interview with Sally Fallon, founder of the Weston A. Price foundation, on page 50.]

Olive Oil

Dr. Parker points out that health studies do stand behind the claim that olive oil is a superfood. “The Food and Drug Administration recommends adding about two tablespoons of olive oil a day to reduce the risk of heart disease. According to a study published in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, participants who consumed two tablespoons of olive oil daily for one week had higher antioxidant levels to protect them against the dangerous oxidation of LDL cholesterol that is associated with heart disease risk (5). Olive oil contains monounsaturated fat that doesn’t raise the bad LDL cholesterol levels in the blood.”

**Beneficial Components of Olive Oil
Are the Antioxidants, Particularly Vitamin E and Polyphenols.**

“The other beneficial components of olive oil are the antioxidants, particularly vitamin E and polyphenols,” says Dr. Parker. “The antioxidants neutralize damaging free radicals, thus contributing to their anti-cancer effect. Polyphenols also protect the heart and blood vessels against free radical damage and, in addition, can reduce the risk of developing neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s.”

But don’t just start pouring on any old olive oil to your foods, Dr. Parker cautions. “In order to ensure the most benefit and highest levels of polyphenols, always choose ‘extra-virgin’ olive oil. Extra virgin olive oil is the least processed, as it is from the first pressing of the olives. ‘Virgin’ olive oil is from the second pressing, while ‘pure’ olive oil is the most processed because it is refined and then filtered.”

Sources: (1) Food For Fitness by Chris Carmichael; (2) http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FDN/is_5_7/ai_94159012; (3 and 4) Journal of Nutrition, 2006; (5) www.nature.com/ejcn/journal/v56/n2/abs/1601293a.htm.