

The Gold of the North in Wellness

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Dietary habits are increasingly acknowledged as a key to good health. Studies tracking immigrants to the United States from countries such as Japan, which is recognized for its low incidence of cancer and heart disease, find that once assimilated to our 'fast food' habits the rates of chronic disease skyrocket in these populations to match that of Americans. Western science and medicine acknowledges now that poor dietary habits are in fact correlated with many chronic diseases including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, arthritis, and degenerative brain disorders. Alaskan summers may be fleeting, but they produce some of the most beneficial foods for maintaining and improving one's health. In simplest terms healthy food habits depend on eating plenty of vegetables and fruits (I don't include canned vegetables or fruits as healthy foods) and high quality protein. Secondly, moderation, we Americans tend to like extremes and binges, but just because something is good for us does not mean an excess of it is even better!

VEGGIES, VEGGIES, VEGGIES...we all know they are good but how many of us eat enough of them?

Dark leafy greens: Kale, collards, swiss chard, beet greens, spinach, romaine lettuce...These have come to the forefront of nutritional research as the most important foods to consume on a daily basis to maintain health and prevent illness. We all know why these are so good for us—high fiber which promotes healthy bowels, rich source of vitamins, some minerals and antioxidants which all told are very beneficial to health.

Crucifer vegetables: Cabbages, turnips, broccoli, kale, collards, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, asian greens, radish...All contain plant chemicals, indoles and isothiocyanates, that increase enzymes in the body to break down and detoxify carcinogenic substances. (It is best not to eat more than 4 servings of raw crucifer vegetables per week as they can interfere with thyroid hormone production. Cooking deactivates the guilty constituent.)

Allium vegetables: Garlic, onion, chive, shallot, and leek are high in allyl sulfides that block carcinogenic compounds. Garlic deserves special attention as it is preventative to all types of cancer, promotes cellular health, and may delay and decrease the incidence of tumors. Garlic is spectacular for protecting the cardiovascular system, and is a potent antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral and antiparasitic herb.

A word about antioxidants: Fruits and vegetables supply a wide array of antioxidants, well known for their ability to protect cells from toxic substances produced and absorbed by the body through daily activities. Various antioxidant groups are credited with specific benefits and the general wisdom is that "eating the rainbow" of fruits and vegetables will offer the greatest degree of health benefits. The following list highlights the "powerhouses" of the antioxidant world: fruits, especially berries are excellent sources.

Ellagic Acid: Highest in raspberries, blueberries, and cranberries; heat destroys ellagic acid but freezing does not. Fruits are typically concentrated sources of anti-oxidants, while wild berries top the charts.

Carotenoids: Carrots, collards, spinach, beet greens, green peppers, tomato, squash, young fireweed leaves, cloudberry, high and lowbush cranberries. Carotene is the orange pigment in fruits and vegetables that is a precursor to Vitamin A, it also increases immune function.

Vitamin C, Bioflavonoids, and Glutathione: Most fresh vegetables and fruits have significant amounts of these. Wild berries are often a concentrated source of Vitamin C. Flavonoids are highest in pigments of deeply colored fruits and vegetables (red and purple). Glutathione helps with detoxification at a cellular level and increases the life span of cells.

Wild Mushrooms: Boletes, morels and other non-toxic ones of course! Mushrooms are generally high in minerals, particularly potassium which helps regulate cellular fluid and nutrient balance. Button mushrooms commonly sold in supermarkets do not offer the same health benefits.

Wild fish: Cold water fish such as salmon, halibut, whitefish, herring, trout provide Essential Fatty Acids that decrease and inhibit the incidence of most cancers, protect the heart, aid digestive and kidney function, and decrease inflammation.

Wild or organic meats: Wild game and organic meats provide high quality proteins, amino acids and minerals to our bodies. A healthy serving of meat is actually the amount that can be held in your hand (like a deck of cards). Many people do better living in a cold environment eating meat, but again moderation is the key. The animal products that our culture has shunned like bone marrow, kidneys, and liver are very nutritious.

The Dark Side

Saturated fat can stimulate cancer cell growth; limiting animal fats is critical to almost all health imbalances. However, saturated fats are the most stable of fats so they are the best fats to use when greasing pans or frying foods, as most vegetable oils become carcinogenic at high temperatures. Next time someone you know is hunting or slaughtering organic livestock save the fat for these uses (why waste good quality fat and buy butter or margarine at the store?).

In general, foods that are hard to resist or addictive are implicated in many illnesses: saturated and hydrogenated fats, alcohol, caffeine, white sugar, processed foods, food additives and salt.

Summary

Our daily choices do make a difference. Local foods provide vital nourishment to our bodies, decrease our dependence on fossil fuels, and provide greater incentive to take care of the land surrounding us. The season is short but there is great health to be gained by cultivating, harvesting, and putting up the gifts of our far northern land.

Resources:

Erasmus, Udo. Fats That Heal, Fats That Kill. (Alive Books, 1993).

Haas, Elson. Staying Healthy with Nutrition. (Celestial Arts, 2006)

Murray, Michael. How to Prevent and Treat Cancer with Natural Medicine. (Riverhead Trade, 2003)

Pitchford, Paul. Healing with Whole Foods. (North Atlantic Press, 2002)