

Family Friendly Factsheet

Superfoods



The term 'superfood' has become ubiquitous in the media of present. As research advances, the list of 'superfoods' continues to grow, with foods mentioned including exotic produce such as pomegranates and goji berries as well as UK produce such as watercress and apples. But what makes a food 'super'? Will eating these foods really have such an impact on our health and wellbeing?

What exactly is a 'superfood'?

Although there is no scientific definition, 'superfoods' are generally foods that are particularly dense in a certain compound considered to be beneficial to health, for example an antioxidant, mineral or vitamin. While there is no doubt that certain foods are higher in certain compounds than others, the confusion lies with the term 'superfood', which could imply that the food is more beneficial than others, leading to 'superfoods' being favoured over other foods.

Rules and regulations

In July 2007, the European Union introduced new regulations, stating that food labelled as a 'superfood' must be supported by scientific evidence, authorised by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), to explain what the benefits are and why the food is considered healthy.

Should I buy 'superfoods'?

The endorsement of 'superfoods' by retailers and manufacturers may cause other equally valuable foods to be overlooked. Sales of acai berries, blueberries, green tea and walnuts (all of 'superfood' status) have risen dramatically over the last few years, leading to increased demand for these foods, some of which are imported to meet these requirements. The cost of importing these foods is reflected in the retail price, meaning that many 'superfoods' can be expensive.

There is concern that people will buy this often expensive produce tagged as a 'superfood' in place of 'ordinary' food, but still spend the same amount of money, limiting the range and amount of foods eaten.

While these foods can play an important part in a healthy diet, it is also important to note that the nutrients provided by these foods can be obtained from a balanced diet. For example, blueberries are considered a 'superfood' due to their high content of antioxidants and vitamin C. While blueberries undoubtedly do contain valuable nutrients, there are numerous other foods, which are not considered 'superfoods', with similar benefits.

'Superfood' Myths

The marketing surrounding 'superfoods' has contributed to the misunderstanding that foods labelled as 'super' are superior to those that aren't. Although some 'superfoods' may have a higher vitamin or mineral content than 'ordinary' foods, our bodies have specific requirements for these nutrients, the body will use only the amount it needs and any excess will go to waste.

In the laboratory, most foods are broken down into their constituent parts to be studied, the interaction of nutrients present in the food may cause the nutrients to act differently when the food is eaten as a whole, meaning accurate predictions about health benefits are hard to make. For this reason, many health experts are skeptical about the claims made about 'superfoods'.

In short, 'superfoods' do not provide anything which a healthy balanced diet would not; no one food can provide all of the nutrients necessary for good health, it has been suggested that rather than consumption of 'superfoods', a 'super diet' consisting of a wide variety of foods would be more healthful.