

**F**ruits, veggies, grains, nuts and seeds are all grown from the earth, ready to eat, without any required cooking, processing or, of course, slaughtering. These natural foods are an invaluable part of a healthy diet, thanks to their rich supplies of PHYTOCHEMICALS, a healthy buzzword that's making a comeback in nutrition research arenas.

In her book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Total Nutrition*, Joy Bauer M.S., R.D., explains the basics: "Phytochemicals (meaning plant chemicals) is another group of compounds in plant foods—legumes, veggies, fruits, and whole grains—that might positively affect your body. They're naturally produced by plants to protect themselves against viruses, bacteria, and fungi. The term 'phytochemical' includes hundreds of naturally occurring substances such as carotenoids, flavonoids, indoles, isoflavones, capsaicin, and protease inhibitors."

Phytochemicals are contained in natural foods. They are what gives the earth's edible plants their color, flavor and texture. And we are only on the brink of knowing everything about them. Today, only a few thousands have been identified in nature's pharmacopia, and, of those, only a handful have been found, thus far, to have any effect on the human body. Yet nutrition researchers do know how we can all get our daily phytochemical dose. Simply eat a diet rich in goodies grown from the ground.

Phytochemicals were once considered to be part of the micronutrient family, meaning vitamins and minerals. Flavonoids, found in onions and garlic, were called vitamin P. (For Potty mouth?) Indoles were known as vitamin U, and ubiquinone was vitamin Q, now known as Co-Enzyme Q10. Yet phytochemicals were stripped

# mother nature's FARMacy

Start washing, chopping and chowing those veggies, fruits, nuts and grains—they pack a phytochemical punch (in other words, they're powerhouse health-promoters and disease-fighters).

By Dawn Blaschick Schlesinger

of their elite nutritional status when scientists could not ascertain deficiency levels. Some phytochemicals did manage to maintain their good dietetic standing, however, such as tocopherol, which remains known as vitamin E, and beta carotene, which is what the body transforms into vitamin A.

While some phytochemicals have been used for medical purposes for centuries, others are just beginning to be studied. On the natural medicine front, quinine, found on the bark of the cinchona tree in the Amazonian Andes, has been used to effectively treat malaria. Digitalis, which is obtained from the leaves of the foxglove plant, has been shown to strengthen the contractions of the heart muscle.

## The Phytochemical Good Health Wallop

Although each phytochemical is different, there are several health benefits that they produce.

**1. They possess antioxidant properties.** Antioxidants are essential for combating cellular damage caused by free radicals. Some of the more noted antioxidants are from the carotenoid family. Lycopene, which is most abundant in tomatoes, is the primary carotenoid in the body and has more than 500 compounds. According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, lycopene is being examined for its effects in not only helping to prevent cancer, but heart disease as well. Lutein and zeaxanthin are the primary carotenoids

of the central part of the retina (macula) and are responsible for protecting your eyes from sunlight. These two carotenoids can be found in tomatoes, as well as leafy greens, and have been said to protect the eyes from degeneration. Beta-carotene, another carotenoid with antioxidant benefits, is found in broccoli, carrots, cantaloupe, spinach, squash and sweet potatoes. Another cancer-fighting group of phytochemicals is flavonoids. They can be primarily found in green and black teas, citrus fruits, onions and garlic.

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