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Superfoods: Nutritional heavyweights stand tall

What's on your plate?

By Carol Ness

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Forget about the low-carb craze. Let's leave that in 2005. So, what's the get-healthy, get-thin thing to do in '06? Take your pick -- blueberries, avocado, spinach or dark chocolate.

Such "superfoods" are the current darlings of healthy-eating bestsellerdom. The premise is that certain foods are nutritional powerhouses, and should be piled into grocery carts and lunch boxes. Blueberries bubble with cancer-fighting, heart-healthy antioxidants, avocados ooze with the same good fats that olive oil has, and spinach, well, spinach has it all, as Popeye always knew.

Current superstars are tea and dark chocolate, both brimming with antioxidants. (When coffee makes the list, it'll be nirvana.)

The claims about these foods made by food marketing professionals and in popular books like *SuperFoods Rx*, by San Diego ophthalmologist Steven Pratt (William Morrow 2004, 336 pages, \$24.95), tend to create the impression that "superfoods" are the nutritional equivalent of the fountain of youth and will save you from cancer, heart disease, diabetes and every other scourge of good health.

That's probably not true.

But that doesn't mean superfoods should be dismissed.

The fact is, there's every reason to eat them.

GOOD NUTRITION

The antioxidants in blueberries are good for you. Avocado's monounsaturated fats are healthier than, say, the saturated fats in butter. A little bit of dark chocolate does contain micronutrients that help lower blood pressure and do other good things for the heart.

It's called nutrition, a concept dietitians have been trying to sell for years. Now, suddenly, it's trendy.

Pratt and co-writer Kathy Matthews have probably done the most to popularize the concept. Pratt noticed the connection between good nutrition and health when patients

suffering age-related macular degeneration improved when they started eating more nutritious foods.

Their *SuperFoods Rx* highlighted "14 foods that will change your life," and made the case for each as an ingredient that "can help you extend your lifespan." The book summarizes research studies on the beneficial effects of various foods, pulling together the good news from the torrent of conflicting reports about nutrition that flood the media.

For example, tomatoes have tons of cancer-fighting lycopene. Turkey breast is an exceptionally lean source of protein. And drinking tea -- green or black -- delivers a potent dose of antioxidants.

Last month, the authors came out with a follow-up called *SuperFoods HealthStyle*, which updates research on the first 14, and adds another dozen or so.

FIBER, VITAMIN C

New to the list are apples (for fiber), kiwis (for vitamin C), and the avocado and dark chocolate previously mentioned.

The thing to remember, as both Pratt and nutritionists like Jo Ann Hattner emphasize, is that superfoods are really just a way to think about adding whole foods to your diet. Most of them are fruits and vegetables; oats, a whole grain, are also on the list.

All of the superfoods would fit neatly into the federal government's prescription for healthy eating -- if they're eaten in appropriate amounts.

One ounce of dark chocolate may be good for you, but more is not merrier -- at least nutritionally. Chocolate -- and likewise olive oil -- has so many calories, you really should eat only a little at a time.

The other thing is, the superfoods list means people are likely to be eating lots of blueberries while ignoring all their berry friends, like raspberries and boysenberries, as well as other red fruits like cherries. But that would be a mistake.

The other berries may not have quite as many anthocyanins (antioxidants) as blueberries, but they have some and are likely to contain other micronutrients whose value simply hasn't yet been studied as much yet.

"When you look at the list of superfoods, it's the ones that have had the most research," says Hattner, a San Francisco registered dietitian who teaches nutrition at the Stanford School of Medicine.

"There are so many foods that there are benefits for but we haven't studied it."