



THE
RIGHT
STUFF

Nutrition expert **Suzie Sawyer** discusses which foods offer the most nutritional bang for their buck

There's a famous quote from Hippocrates which states, "Let food be thy medicine", and the fact is that nature has provided us with everything we need from food (and water).

However, many of us are not sufficiently embracing nature's wonders, often through lack of proper knowledge, or just down to being stressed out with busy lives.

A review in *Nutrition Bulletin* produced by the British Nutrition Foundation highlighted specific micronutrients, including folate, vitamin D, calcium, iron and iodine being the most deficient in certain subgroups of the population. Interestingly, all these nutrients have a bearing on the health of future generations whether it be for cognitive function, growth or strong teeth and bones. These micronutrients (and many others) need to be eaten in sufficient amounts during pregnancy and throughout the early years and beyond, to protect our future population. The same report also goes on to recommend fortification of some foods (folate fortification is on the table right now), and supplementation of certain nutrients for some sectors of the population.

As nature intended

Nature has, of course, provided the full spectrum of macro and micronutrients, antioxidants and other amazing plant compounds, in order to keep the body optimally healthy. However, it can sometimes be challenging to know which foods are the best ones to eat and to prioritise over others.

There are many foods that have been awarded the title of "superfood". And whilst some of this can be attributed to marketing hype, there is no question that you can definitely get more bang for your buck from certain foods. Take broccoli as an example. It can wear its superfood badge with pride, not just for its very wide nutrient content but also for its powerful antioxidant compounds and anti-inflammatory properties. Inflammation is at the root of most of our serious degenerative diseases, including cancer and heart disease. Plus, broccoli uprates the liver's natural detoxification processes. Around 200-300g of broccoli a day has been shown to be most beneficial.

Broccoli is a member of the family of Brassicas, otherwise known as cruciferous vegetables, which includes cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale, cress and

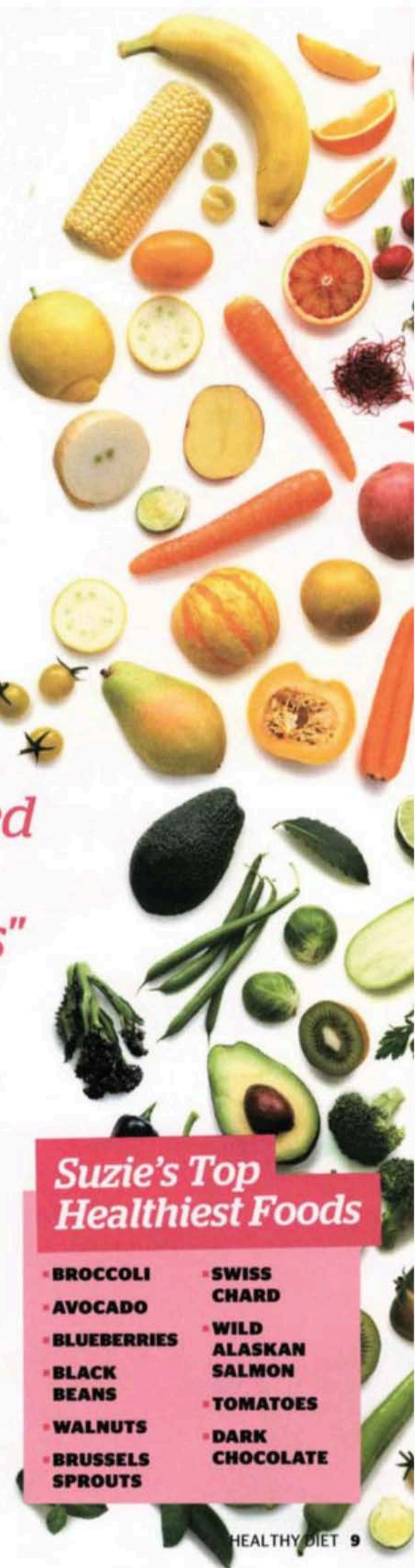
bok choy. Therefore, it would be wrong to single out broccoli when its other family members also have so much to offer and are all wonderful additions to the daily diet.

Nature has also provided us with foods that are very colourful. This is partly by design - making food attractive to eat - but also because the colours store the secrets to their fabulous health benefits. For example, foods with red, orange or yellow pigments are rich in carotenoids which are also found in many plants, algae and bacteria. There are several groups of carotenes, one of the best-known being beta-carotene found in carrots, cantaloupe, sweet potatoes and papaya. Foods within this group are particularly beneficial to health because they convert into vitamin A within the body as needed. Vitamin A is essential for the health of the immune system and for vision. It is primarily found in animal products; therefore, vegans won't be eating any directly. However, by eating plenty of foods containing beta-carotene, the body will convert what it needs. Another carotenoid, lycopene, found in tomatoes, does not convert to vitamin A, but still delivers great antioxidant health benefits.

"Fruit is loaded with many vital nutrients"

Specifically, lycopene has been found to help the health of the male prostate and is better absorbed when eaten from cooked sources such as tinned tomatoes or tomato ketchup! That's no excuse to ignore fresh, delicious tomatoes though. Interestingly, newer research has also found the presence of carotenoids in dark, leafy greens (especially spinach). I wonder if Popeye realised spinach wasn't *only* going to make him strong!

Other members of the carotenoid family, which don't have pro-vitamin A activity, are lutein and zeaxanthin. These are the only two that are found in the lens of the eye; hence they have been credited with helping eye health and protecting vision, particularly as we age. Both these carotenoids are found in cruciferous vegetables as well as spinach. The darker the colours, the more carotenoids and



Suzie's Top Healthiest Foods

- BROCCOLI
- AVOCADO
- BLUEBERRIES
- BLACK BEANS
- WALNUTS
- BRUSSELS SPROUTS
- SWISS CHARD
- WILD ALASKAN SALMON
- TOMATOES
- DARK CHOCOLATE



other antioxidant compounds they will contain.

It would be wrong to discuss colourful vegetables without also mentioning colourful fruit. Fruit can sometimes get bad press because it contains sugar. True enough, but fruit is high in fructose which has much less effect on blood sugar levels - and therefore weight gain - than certain processed, sugar-laden foods and snacks. Most importantly, fruit is loaded with many vital nutrients and antioxidants. Again, it's all about the colour and certainly the dark purple fruits (blueberries and blackberries) and the red ones, (strawberries) have plenty to shout about in terms of their antioxidant potential. However, all fruits (especially papaya, strawberries, kiwis and oranges) are the best sources of immune-boosting vitamin C. Vitamin C is easily destroyed by light, storage and food preparation so fruit is always best eaten as soon after picking as possible. However, frozen fruits are often frozen and packaged quickly after harvesting so tend to retain more of their nutrients than those stored and shipped around the world.

The right fats

We don't often think of fats as being healthy and of course many people, especially those watching their weight, will push back against eating them. This is an unhealthy

strategy however. Whilst eating too many saturated fats found in red meat, butter and cheese will certainly add to the calorie load and can be stored as fat in unwanted places, especially around the heart, some fats are essential.

The omega-3s primarily found in oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and sardines and nuts and seeds, cannot be made in the body, therefore must be eaten in the diet or supplemented. Omega-3s are essential for a healthy heart, joints, brain and eyes. Indeed,

certain omega-3s are found in the brain. Wild Alaskan salmon is generally free from toxic heavy metals and other contaminants often found in certain fish. Plus,

it's high in the omegas EPA and DHA but also contains another nutritional treasure, astaxanthin. Wild salmon naturally eat the astaxanthin-rich algae, which is responsible for the pink salmon colour. Astaxanthin is one of the most powerful antioxidants known to man. Interestingly, it is also a carotenoid and has a wonderful affinity for the health of the eyes, brain, joints and bones.

Foods such as avocados also contain monounsaturated fats which have been shown to be beneficial for the heart (just like olive oil). Avocados are also very high in the heart-loving mineral, potassium.

Indeed, they are another food worthy of superfood status because they contain as many as 20 health-boosting nutrients, including fibre.

The whole truth

From a nutritional perspective, we often talk about eating 'whole' foods. This means foods that have been processed or refined as little as possible and don't contain artificial additives or substances - in short, just as nature intended. In our heavily processed, typical Western diet, whole foods are not featured nearly as much as they should be.

Clearly, fruits and vegetables, eaten fresh are classified as whole foods. However, all varieties of beans such as soybeans, kidney beans, black beans and many others, deliver an array of health benefits, especially energy-boosting B vitamins, antioxidants, protein and fibre. Additionally, whole grains such as brown rice, quinoa, oats and bulgur wheat, as examples, have not been processed, and therefore retain many of their natural nutrients. When a grain, such as rice, is processed, the outer part is removed. This also removes the fibre, B vitamins and many other nutrients, hence a 'whole' diet is always the healthiest and delivers the most nutrients.

Treat yourself

If, however, you're feeling in need of a real mood boost, then you'll be delighted to know that chocolate is nutrient-dense and contains many health-giving antioxidants. However, it needs to be dark chocolate and the darker the better. Dark chocolate is rich in many trace minerals including calcium, iron, copper, magnesium and phosphorus. Plus, it's loaded with antioxidant-rich polyphenols which have a beneficial effect on blood pressure. This is the reason that you'll often see chocolate making its way onto the superfood chart!

"A 'whole' diet is always healthiest"

Our Expert



Suzie Sawyer is a clinical nutritionist and an advisor to nutrient supplement brand Alive! feelaliveuk.com

