

The Real Superfoods

By Gail Hutchison ANutr – Food and Health Development Worker

We all know that a healthy balanced diet is key to maintaining optimal health, so it's unsurprising that newspapers, magazines and the internet latch onto stories of miracle foods which claim to have extraordinary health benefits. But how much of this is actually true? And do we really need to spend a fortune on specialist foods which claim to ward off illness and increase longevity?

Almost all foods contain nutrients, but a 'superfood' is essentially something which has a high amount of a certain nutrient and supposedly exerts certain positive health benefits. It is a term which has become trendy in the last few years and often products will be marketed in this way in order to get us consumers to buy them. Unfortunately a lot of what is reported in the media can either be contradictory, inaccurate or unhelpful for the general public, with foods often being labelled as healthy one minute and then unhealthy the next.

In the case of certain superfoods, often the media fail to recognise and report on limitations of research carried out on certain individual foods, making the results inapplicable to everyday diets. For instance, very high levels of a certain nutrient may have been used in a study, levels which are usually not realistically attainable for those eating a regular diet. This means that people would need to consume large amounts of these foods frequently in order to gain the alleged health benefits, something which may not always be appropriate. For example, regularly consuming cocoa in the form of chocolate would not only increase the health promoting benefits of flavonoids but also increase sugar and saturated fat intake which in the UK – given our high levels of obesity and type 2 diabetes – we should be significantly reducing.

Another aspect to consider is that a lot of research done on superfoods is conducted in laboratories involving cells or animals rather than humans, making it difficult to assess the effects and impact in people. Often those which have been done in humans have not had conclusive results or the effects have been relatively short term.

Labelling foods as 'super' in the media also gives consumers the impression that some foods are more healthy or valuable than others. In reality, items we might commonly find in any kitchen cupboard or fridge often convey the same health benefits as these foods, but without the marketing hype or added expense. For instance, wholegrain varieties of starchy foods such as rice, pasta and bread are high in vitamins and minerals plus dietary fibre, which can prevent bowel cancer, lower cholesterol and keeps us fuller for longer. These also have the advantage of being cheap and readily available and therefore can be consumed regularly and in high enough quantities to get the most of their nutrient content. Despite media coverage of exotic (and expensive) products such as goji berries and wheatgrass, other more commonly purchased and affordable fruits such as apples, oranges and berries and vegetables such as broccoli and spinach pack a similar nutritional punch.

These are high in vitamins A, C and E, minerals such as iron, and dietary fibre, all of which vital for good health. Another food often overlooked is the humble egg. Eggs are a cheap alternative to costly superfood grains such as quinoa, are a complete source of protein and are perfectly fine to consume daily – contrary to popular belief they have no effect on cholesterol! A healthier and cheaper alternative to coconut oil is rapeseed oil (most supermarket own brand oils are now rapeseed) which is lower in saturated fat, higher in the good fats, and costs a fraction of the price. Tinned oily fish, such as sardines and mackerel, are much cheaper than fresh salmon and still contain much more of the essential

polyunsaturated fatty acids EPA and DHA, plus loads of calcium, iron and some vitamin D.

The bottom line is that yes, some so-called superfoods can be good for us as part of a healthy balanced diet. However, eating healthily needn't break the bank. The majority of items on the shelves deemed as 'super' are labelled as a marketing ploy to get consumers to spend more money. There is almost always a cheaper alternative with the same health benefits. It is also important to add that no one food in isolation contains all of the vital nutrients needed for overall health, nor will it ward off illness or prevent disease if we otherwise lead an unhealthy lifestyle. Essentially, the focus should not be on a handful of foods deemed as 'super' but on upping our intake of a wide range of fruit and vegetables, increasing wholegrain starchy carbohydrates, and reducing sugar, fat and salt in line with Government recommendations (as seen in the Eatwell plate).

Submitted by [Gail Hutchison](#)

