

Get to know your onions....

Our regular readers will know that we at Edinburgh Community Food are not fans of the co-called 'superfood' trend. Rather than asking folk to shell out money on this month's latest pricey food fad (chia seeds at the moment) we like to focus on more humble – but equally nutritious – ingredients. Pretty much all natural foods are 'super' and to this end we've recently looked at how great cheap oily fish, beans, eggs and oats are.

Famous for reducing grown men (and everyone else) to tears, the ubiquitous onion, a real staple of cooking around the world and also seriously cheap, is sadly much overlooked in terms of nutrition. We've been cultivating onions for use in food for well over 7,000 years (the ancient Egyptians even worshipped it)! As a result, it's the basis for a huge range of dishes, from pasta sauces, to curries, to Mexican food, to good old stews, to Scottish favourites lentil soup and skirlie (how many recipes don't start with the instruction: 'gently fry an onion'?). Onions are also pickled (which annoyingly ruins their nutrition), added to salads or the rings are battered and fried. But how many of us actually know what they're good for?

White onions are part of a huge family which also includes the wonderful garlic, along with spring onions, leeks, chives, shallots and, of course, red onions. Like many vegetables they are high in water and very low in calories. A typical white onion has small amounts of many vitamins and minerals, with the best being vitamins B6 and C. However, it is when we come to things called phytochemicals that onions really begin to shine. Indeed, they are far higher in these wonderful compounds than many other fruit and vegetables. As far as research goes onions have played second fiddle to their much-studied and highly nutritious cousin, garlic. However, evidence is growing that onions may be good for our heart &

blood vessel health and also help to reduce the risk of blood clots. Older people, especially women, may suffer from brittle bones and while milk (calcium) continues to be very important throughout life it is thought that eating onions every day may also help us to strengthen our bones.

In addition to this onions, in common with oily fish and the dinner plate-staining Indian spice turmeric, are strongly anti-inflammatory. Many health problems – including rheumatoid arthritis, the flu, asthma and simply being overweight – cause inflammation in the body. In the short term this is useful and normal, helping us to heal. But in the longer term inflammation is no good for us at all and may in turn lead to further illness and even depression. Regular consumption of onions is also thought to help reduce the risk of various cancers, including colon, throat and ovarian cancers.

When cooking with onions don't err on the side of caution! Studies suggest that to get the benefits of onions we should eat them on most days, if not every day. Try to use at least two for an average four-person meal. Think of a good individual portion as half of a medium onion. As with all vegetables, the shorter time we cook them the better as this preserves the nutrition. Use a minimum of oil and keep frying times on a medium heat to under seven minutes.

Storage: Onions are best stored at room temperature in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place and should keep for up to one month. Try to keep them away from other vegetables as they will absorb their moisture and make them go off quicker.

A small word of warning though: never feed onions to dogs, cats or other animals. Animals cannot digest onions and they may even prove fatal.

Edinburgh Community Food sells white onions for 65p/kg and red onions for 91p/kg.

If you would like to set up a home or office delivery (free on

orders over £10) please get in touch at: admin@edinburghcommunityfood.org.uk Alternatively, why not have a shot at growing your own? Onions, like garlic, are relatively easy to grow in Scotland and if you don't have a garden you could find out about local community gardens/allotments and ask about getting a raised bed.

Submitted by [Christopher Mantle](#)

