

Heart Beat: What Foods Are Rich in Antioxidants?

A group of researchers measured the antioxidant content of hundreds of foods. The top choices are healthy foods, which reinforces the correlation between eating foods rich in antioxidants and better overall health.

From Harvard Health Publications

- Single antioxidants, like vitamin E or beta carotene, have never lived up to the hype that they halt heart disease, cure cancer, eradicate eye disease, or prevent Alzheimer's. That shouldn't be surprising. The notion that antioxidants are good for you comes from studies showing that people who eat foods rich in antioxidants have better long-term health. Trials of single supplements, usually taken in pill form, have yielded disappointing results.

Antioxidants stabilize harmful by-products of the body's energy-making machinery. These by-products, known as free radicals, can damage DNA, make LDL (bad) cholesterol even worse, and wreak havoc elsewhere in the body.

It's possible that single antioxidants haven't panned out because it takes a network of antioxidants — like those that exist in foods — to neutralize free radicals. If that's the case, then it would be helpful to determine the antioxidant content of various foods.

An international team of researchers did just that for more than a thousand foods that Americans commonly eat. Topping the list were blackberries, walnuts, strawberries, artichokes, cranberries, coffee, raspberries, pecans, blueberries, and ground cloves (see "Antioxidant-rich foods").

Antioxidant-rich foods

Here are the three dozen foods with the highest per-serving content of antioxidants.

Product	Antioxidants mmol/serving
Blackberries	5.746
Walnuts	3.721
Strawberries	3.584
Artichokes, prepared	3.559
Cranberries	3.125
Coffee	2.959
Raspberries	2.870

Pecans	2.741
Blueberries	2.680
Cloves, ground	2.637
Grape juice	2.557
Chocolate, baking, unsweetened	2.516
Cranberry juice	2.474
Cherries, sour	2.205
Wine, red	2.199
Power Bar, chocolate flavor	1.875
Pineapple juice	1.859
Guava nectar	1.858
Juice drinks, 10% juice, blueberry or strawberry flavor, vitamin-C enriched	1.821
Cranapple juice	1.790
Prunes	1.715
Chocolate, dark, sugar-free	1.675
Cabbage, red, cooked	1.614
Orange juice	1.510
Apple juice, with added vitamin C	1.462
Mango nectar	1.281
Pineapples	1.276
Oranges	1.261
Bran Flakes breakfast cereal	1.244
Plums, black	1.205
Pinto beans, dried	1.137
Canned chili with meat and beans	1.049
Canned chili with meat, no beans	1.045
Spinach, frozen	1.040

Whole Grain Total breakfast cereal	1.024
Chocolate, sugar-free	1.001

Source: *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, July 2006

Cooking appears to increase the antioxidant potential of most foods, with the exception of grains such as rice, pasta, and corn grits, which show lower levels after cooking.

The researchers were careful not to claim that eating foods at the top of the list will keep you healthy. Instead, they believe that rating the antioxidant potential of different foods could help test whether antioxidants really do prevent disease. In the meantime, the list toppers are healthy foods, so don't hesitate to dig in.