

# Longevity Diet

If you're looking for a youth elixir, you'll find it in certain foods that can help us stave off the ageing process and ward off degenerative diseases.

Words by **Karen Fontaine**

**I**t was the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates who pronounced “let food be thy medicine” – and, in the 21st century, we can ask food to be medicinal with an anti-ageing edge. Hippocrates was the first person to believe that diseases were caused by diet and living factors – not, as was widely thought, a punishment from the gods. He was certainly onto something: by choosing to eat foods rich in antioxidants and phytochemicals, we can help prevent the onset of degenerative diseases.

Of course, not all food is created equal in the anti-ageing stakes. Some experts say the secret to staying young can be found in certain fruits and vegetables, green tea, spices and various other foods rich in antioxidants and other potentially age-deterring compounds.

The outward signs of ageing, such as wrinkles, aren't just skin-deep, of course. There's memory loss, decreased brain function, and an increased risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, osteoporosis and cancer.

Dietitian Dr Penny Small, author of *The Food Lover's Diet* (Allen & Unwin, 2011), says, “Food can – and does – offer a very important way to stave off the ageing process but more importantly, it's about having a lifestyle that includes exercise, plenty of sleep and low stress levels. There has been a lot of focus on ‘superfoods’ and the anti-ageing role they play,” she adds.

“There's great interest at the moment in polyphenol antioxidants. It's a new science which is getting some very exciting results.”

## WHAT ARE BIOACTIVES?

International research published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in 2005 has shown different types of plant foods have different types and different levels of polyphenol that may have different roles in protecting the body from the things we encounter as we get older.

“The health benefits being attributed to coffee may be because it is a source of antioxidants, however polyphenols have benefits beyond oxidation and so now are being called ‘bioactives,’” says Small. “For example, we know that soy, which is a major source of isoflavones [a subset of polyphenol antioxidants], has been shown to have significant effects on bone health and mild hormonal effects. Therefore, for post-menopausal women, soy is the superfood they should be concentrating on.”

Red wine also contains a complex mix of bioactive compounds with a slew of

Herbs and spices can block the formation of harmful compounds that experts associate with ageing.

health benefits such as cancer prevention, protection of the heart and brain, and reduction of age-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity.

Dietitian Cheryl Forberg, author of *Positively Ageless* (Pan Macmillan, \$35), pegs omega-3 fats as the number-one anti-ageing fat, integral to preventing disease, strengthening your mind, smoothing your skin and more. Sydney naturopath Emma Sutherland agrees: “Oily fish such as mackerel, salmon and sardines are high in omega-3 essential fatty acids, which are highly anti-inflammatory,” she explains. “Inflammation is the basis of all chronic disease such as diabetes, cancer and obesity so eating these healthy fish two to three times per week will reduce your risk of these common diseases.”

## MILK, SPICE AND ALL THINGS NICE

Drinking milk daily can reduce the mortality risk of heart disease and stroke by 15 to 20 per cent, according to a review in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* in 2008. Co-author Ian Givens, a professor from the University of Reading in the UK, said the study found strong evidence linking milk to increased survival – probably due to its ability to reduce blood pressure.

An ability to inhibit the tissue damage that high blood-sugar levels cause is cited as the reason antioxidant-rich herbs and spices are so effective in fighting ageing. US research from the University of Georgia ►

# Youthful Foods

An anti-ageing shopping list should be packed full of produce rich in antioxidants, flavonoids, omega-3 and vitamin K.



## Apples

Apples reduce swelling of all kinds thanks to quercetin, a flavonoid that reduces the risk of allergies, heart attacks, Alzheimer's and prostate and lung cancers.



## Tea & Coffee

Research shows the antioxidants in tea and coffee are providing biomarkers in our blood, which indicate they help to protect us from the damaging effects of oxidation.



## Asparagus

Asparagus is rich in glutathione – our body's most powerful antioxidant, which will help your liver to break down and eliminate toxins (which can age us prematurely).



## Brazil Nuts & Sunflower Seeds

These contain selenium – which helps activate glutathione, helping to regenerate other antioxidants in the body such as vitamin C and E.



## Globe Artichoke & Beetroot

Both help support the liver. Globe artichokes help the liver to break down fats while beetroot helps to cleanse the blood of impurities.



## Fish

Fish such as salmon, tuna and mackerel are a potent source of omega-3 fatty acids, which have been shown to prevent heart disease and cancer.



## Coconut Water

This is one of the most hydrating fluids, as it is an isotonic solution, almost identical to blood plasma. Your cells will remain plump and hydrated, giving you glowing skin.



## Red Wine

Red wine (particularly pinot noir) is high in a compound called resveratrol which has been shown to reduce telomere shortening, a major cause of the ageing process.



## Turmeric

Turmeric has been proven to be as effective as anti-inflammatory drugs. India, where turmeric is eaten daily, has the lowest rates of stomach cancer in the world.



## Chia Seeds

Chia seeds contain 20 per cent omega-3s, which means they have anti-inflammatory properties as well as being great for your skin and healthy hormone balance.



## Soy

The isoflavones in soy are known to protect against heart disease and lower cholesterol. High in protein, soy also helps build and maintain strong, youthful muscles.



## Spinach

Teeming with vitamin K, which protects against osteoporosis by bolstering bone-mineral density, spinach is a renowned muscle builder.



## The Okinawa Secret

There's no fabled fountain of youth in a cluster of Japanese islands called Okinawa – it's their lifestyle that keeps its inhabitants living longer and more healthily than people anywhere else in the world. According to the Okinawa Centenarian Study in 2003, elderly Okinawans have impressively young, clean arteries – attributed to diet, exercise, moderate alcohol use, avoidance of smoking, blood pressure control, and a stress-minimising psychospiritual outlook – and low cholesterol when compared with Westerners. These factors help reduce their risk of coronary heart disease by up to 80 per cent and keep stroke levels low.

Okinawans also have an extremely low risk of hormone-dependent cancers including cancers of the breast, prostate, ovaries and colon. Researchers say some of the most important factors protecting against those cancers include a low caloric intake, high fruit and vegetable consumption, higher intake of good fats, a high-fibre diet, high flavonoid intake, low body-fat level, and high level of physical activity. For Dr Luis Vitetta, director of the Centre for Integrative Clinical and Molecular Medicine at the University of Queensland, it's no accident – and nor is it genetic predisposition – that Okinawans enjoy such a long and high quality of life. "What do they do on the island? On their day off, the Okinawans walk 10,000 steps. On working days, they walk 20,000," he says. "Vegetables, fish and soy comprise around 80 per cent of their diet – if you compare it to a typical Australian diet, it's pretty much the opposite. They have good physical activity, good nutrition and no one gets thrown into the refuse bin in Okinawa – they're not putting 95-year-old grandmothers out to pasture. Everyone's engaged in living."

in 2008 found herbs and spices can also block the formation of harmful compounds associated with ageing. Study co-author James Hargrove listed cinnamon, sage, cloves and oregano as the most effective.

In addition, curcumin, the polyphenol that gives turmeric its tang and colour, has been found to have anti-tumour, anti-arthritis and anti-inflammatory properties. A 2009 study at Ireland's Cork Cancer Research Centre showed it can kill off oesophageal cancer cells.

In fact, eating turmeric curry once or twice a week could play a part in helping to keep Alzheimer's disease and dementia at bay. Murali Doraiswamy, psychiatry professor at the Duke University Medical Centre, North Carolina, told delegates at the Royal College of Psychiatrists' annual meeting in Liverpool in 2009 that curcumin prevented the spread of amyloid plaques. These plaques are thought to contribute to the degradation of the wiring in brain cells and lead to the symptoms of Alzheimer's.

### IT TAKES MORE THAN FOOD

Of course, food alone won't keep us younger for longer, and eating the occasional curry will not atone for an unhealthy diet and sedentary lifestyle. The famous Framingham Heart study in the US (which followed 5209 men and women for 46 years in order to identify the common factors that contribute to cardiovascular disease) found that highly active people lived nearly four years longer than their inactive peers did, largely because they sidestepped heart disease – which is Australia's biggest killer, accounting for 34 per cent of deaths in 2008.

And so in conjunction with a lifestyle that incorporates adequate physical activity, plenty of rest and an avoidance of alcohol and tobacco, eating well can indeed help you age well. For Dr Luis Vitetta, director of the Centre for Integrative Clinical and Molecular Medicine at the University of Queensland's School of Medicine, there must be a holistic approach to anti-ageing. "It's about preventative strategies," he says. "When you have one of these in place, you are more likely to hear people saying: 'Gee, he's 60 but he looks 45!' It's not because of something magical in his genes; it's because he's been doing the right things

all along: never smoking, not overdoing alcohol, exercising regularly. All of these things play a part, but it begins with what you put into your mouth."

Adjusting the amount of food we eat can also be a powerful tool in the fight against ageing. Eating less increases the production of anti-ageing hormones, such as melatonin, says nutritionist Karen Fischer, author of *The Healthy Skin Diet* (Exisle Publishing, \$37). As Fischer points out, when your body doesn't produce enough melatonin, it speeds up the onset of ageing and menopause, and causes sleep disturbances and lethargy.

The good news is, a 2001 study published in the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* showed that melatonin levels can be manipulated by a calorie-restricted diet. In a 12-year study of rhesus monkeys – which, like humans, show a dramatic drop in melatonin secretions as they age – the adult monkeys who were fed 30 per cent less food had better melatonin levels than even the younger monkeys who ate more.

However, Fischer cautions that eating less food shouldn't only be done in short, diet-sized bursts. "Eating 30 per cent less food for short periods does not improve your melatonin levels and it may only have a minor anti-cancer effect or none at all," she says. "You have to eat sensible amounts of food as a way of life to get a lowered risk of cancer or a significant melatonin boost and long-term anti-ageing rewards."

For Sutherland, the key to healthy ageing is choosing organic food wherever possible to avoid ageing pesticides and chemicals; drinking two litres of filtered water daily to ensure your nutrients get onto a cellular level where they have the most effect; eating lots of healthy essential fats such as avocado, nuts, seeds, coconut oil and organic full-fat dairy. "Enjoy adding superfoods and herbs to your diet for a therapeutic effect – for example, raw cacao has the highest source of magnesium of all foods," she suggests. "And eat slowly and joyfully at all times." MF

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