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TOP TEN SUPERFOODS for LONGEVITY: A Medicinal Food Approach©

Introduction

I saw an article in a recent Sunset magazine called the 'Top 10 Feel-Good Foods' (January 2010)¹, which gave me the idea for this similar but different list. This list is modified to include food from a medicinal approach, and eating these foods will help keep one healthy, leading to a long life! This list is based on my dietary knowledge from the perspective of Natural Medicine – both Chinese and Naturopathic Medicine, and Western Nutrition.

I am often making dietary recommendations to patients from the perspective of TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine), which we term Chinese Dietary or Food Therapy, which is more energetically balancing the diet to the needs, constitution or diagnosis of the patient. From this perspective, the diet is tailored to the individual. I also use nutritional value and other scientific or functional medicine analysis of the diet when I make dietary recommendations. A diet (and lifestyle) that creates a well-balanced patient is what will result in longevity and this list shows how one can use foods medicinally to aid in this goal!!

This 'Top Ten' list summarizes the benefits of these foods from a medicinal or nutritional viewpoint, plus lists a few of my favorite recipes (usually simple ones; obtained from various sources through the years) to help make it easier to add these foods to your daily diet. Additionally, consider using organic foods whenever possible to minimize your intake of hormones, antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides which will also aid in living a long life!

Note: recipes referred to are in an addendum to this handout.

1) Number One: Mushrooms, Medicinal

Shitake, Reishi, Maitake – These mushrooms are very basic, have nice subtle flavors, and with an added bonus, even are *medicinal* as described! They are now widely available in the dried form, and can be used in a variety of ways in different recipes. As one Asian scholar says, these mushrooms are the 'The Ultimate Longevity Food'² and have been used by the Asians for thousands of years (before 'Herbal Medicine' there was 'Food Medicine'!)

Benefits

These 'medicinal mushrooms' contain polysaccharides, sterols, vitamins and minerals, and amino acids. Polysaccharides are immunity boosters which prevent both bacterial and viral infections, prevent allergies, regulate blood glucose levels and also prevent cancer! The journal *The Herb Companion* recently had a nice article called "How to Boost Your Immune System with Herbs" which discusses medicinal mushrooms only

briefly but has a great recipe for using these mushrooms in a way that Americans won't find 'medicinal' as much as the ones we use in Chinese Dietary Therapy.³ (Article attached for reference).

Recipes

- ❖ Flu Prevention soup with Astragalus⁴ (Astragalus is an herb available in my office.)
- ❖ Quick Stock Base - See 'Making a Vegetable Stock for Tonic Soup-making'⁵.

2) Number Two: Dark, Leafy Greens (including Sea Vegetables)

Kale, spinach, chards, mustard greens, dandelion, and bok choy (small and large) are all dark, leafy greens that most people are familiar with. I also include here what are now commonly being called 'sea vegetables' but in the past have been known as 'seaweeds' – such as nori, dulse, hijiki, kombu and wakame - that most Americans don't tend to eat (except maybe in sushi). Broccoli can also be included in this list, although we tend to eat the flower and not the leafy greens or the stalk – however, broccoli rabe or Chinese broccoli (now being referred to as broccolini due to one company's trademark) is becoming more commonly available and has more 'leafy green' than the broccoli commonly known by Americans.

❖ Benefits

Greens are full of one special ingredient: chlorophyll and that is why we want 'dark' green leafy veggies in our diet especially. Chlorophyll is a 'blood-builder' or blood strengthener in TCM dietary therapy and treats what we call 'Blood Deficiency'. Blood deficiency can be understood to just mean that the nutrition in the blood is weak. From a Western physiologic or scientific view, the analysis of chlorophyll shows how similar it is to our own blood's chemical composition – hemoglobin contains an iron molecule where chlorophyll has magnesium instead, hence why chlorophyll is known as the 'blood of plants'. So as such, it helps diverse conditions such as dizziness, anemia, menopausal complaints, fatigue, even hypertension, bone disorders including osteoporosis, and more! Greens are also high in lutein, which is beneficial in eye disorders and 'prevents cataracts'⁶.

Dandelion has a special place in natural medicine. It is used medicinally in two forms – the leaf and the root both have various medicinal qualities. The leaf form is mainly used in TCM - it is anti-bacterial, anti-viral and anti-cancer amongst having many other health benefits. It is used in many combinations to treat many conditions – from hypertension to infections to abscesses to cancer. So don't put chemicals on your lawn – and eat your lawn's medicine instead! However, be forewarned that dandelion greens are bitter (but that is why it is so powerful as a food medicinal!)

All the above greens can be used to make excellent, easy-to-prepare stir-fry's! Just add a little bit of anything from mushrooms (hint gotten?) to garlic to onions to soy sauce (or nori or dulse for a mild salty flavor) to any veggies you happen to like (and just omit those that you don't)! I also use traditional Asian spices such as chili peppers, rice wine or fish or oyster sauce (vegetarian options are available), and did I say garlic? Two or three veggie ingredients plus a green, and spices is always a wonderfully delightful addition to a typical dinner.

Sea vegetables tend to be the kelps and seaweeds, all noticeably very dark green as desired for high-chlorophyll content. Try a bit here and there in a soup or salad, and you may realize you like the natural, fishy, salty flavor. (Sorry to digress, but better this type of sodium than all the sodium nitrates and nitrites in commercially cured meats that are, by-the-way, deadly, i.e., carcinogenic vs. nutritious! Uncured meats are now becoming widely available in natural food stores and others, such as in upscale markets such as Trader Joe's.) Sea vegetables are beneficial also in that they supply iodine, which is needed for thyroid health (the lack of iodine in the typical American diet is why salt is iodized today!) Other sources of high-chlorophyll content are the microalgae such as chlorella and spirulina, which can be found in supplement form. They are a very high source of protein and 'one teaspoon of microalgae contains as much as one ounce of beef'⁷. See attached article *Deep Sea Treasures* re: sea vegetables (with recipes)⁸.

Although I highly recommend adding greens to one's diet, if one really cannot manage it or truly dislikes all the variety of possibilities that are available, supplement forms are now widely available in the 'green superfood' supplements that they truly are!

Recipes

- ❖ Kale Caesar Salad⁹
- ❖ Dandelion-Lentil Soup¹⁰
- ❖ Hijiki Salad¹¹

3) Number Three: Berries

Berries are wonderfully delicious and are full of excellent antioxidants, and have a variety of medicinal or nutritional benefits. The ORAC value is a standard assessment of a fruit's antioxidant levels and it is the highest in most blue and red berries, especially red grapes (wine benefits can also be kept in mind), blueberries, blackberries (found wild in our geographic area), cherries, raspberries, cranberries plus not-so-often used ones such as currants and even chokecherries. Other lovely red and blue fruits also are deliciously beneficial and many are now becoming more commonplace, such as pomegranate, Lycium (a traditional Chinese medicinal; aka Wolfberry, GoJi or Gou Qi Zi in TCM), and other fruit juices used in supplement form. These red and blue berries are also classified as 'blood-builders' in TCM, just like greens are above but for their nutrition to strengthen the blood in a different way. The red theme can also be continued in other food sources such as beets, which are also great blood-builders.

Benefits

- ❖ High in antioxidants (high ORAC value).
- ❖ Berries (and pomegranates) are high in elagic acid, a specific potent antioxidant that exhibits significant anti-cancer activity. (It is however destroyed by heat.)¹²
- ❖ Cherries will prevent and treat gout. They help the kidneys leach uric acid out of the body, which forms when the diet is high in purines (usually due to a diet high in red meat or asparagus), often in the feet (and occasionally, in the hands). It is often referred to as 'the rich man's disease'. Blackberries also will benefit gout - juice of either fruit will work.
- ❖ Cranberries will help treat urinary tract infections (usually caused by *E. coli*) and also prevent kidney stones¹³.
- ❖ Lycium – Traditionally used in TCM for thousands of years in both dietary and herbal medicine, it is especially excellent for strengthening the vision (high in beta-carotene, an antioxidant) and helps treat many eye disorders in proper combination. (American varieties are becoming available in medicinal gardening now, which are easy to grow but are smaller in size than those from China.) It is also 'high in polysaccharides, which stimulate the immune system and signal the pituitary to secrete human growth hormone'.¹⁴

Recipes

- ❖ Berry Mold¹⁵ – Fun, healthy dessert that can be modified in numerous healthy ways – just experiment (everyone loves jello)!!
- ❖ Lycium – This is a dried small red fruit and can be added to dishes instead of or in addition to raisins. For example, in oatmeal or other cereals, in nut mixes, and some dessert recipes such as cookies. It is also used in TCM in rice medicinal soups, or congees, and is also a nice, sweet addition in some vegetable soups.
- ❖ Dr. Mao's Anti-aging Brain Mix¹⁶ (includes Lycium)

4) Number Four: Salmon, Sardines and Mackerel: Omega-3 filled Fish

Wonderfully tasty, flaky salmon-colored salmon is full of Omega-3 fatty acids, which are a beneficial fat that is low in fat also. Omega-3's are also known as the Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs) and are essential in our diet as the term suggests. Fish such as salmon are highly nutritious, but one should try to purchase only wild salmon, since farmed salmon is full of PCBs, a chemical found in agricultural pesticides, with a red dye added also for color. However, there is still a dilemma - wild salmon is also known to contain methylmercury, but it does not stay in the body for long. Therefore, the general advice is to eat fish only two times a week and avoid it completely when pregnant.¹⁷ Unfortunately, wild salmon has become less available fresh and local, but more available frozen and from other countries.

I don't generally recommend canned salmon but we as Americans still think tuna only comes in a can (and many other foods as well)!! (And canned tuna has been a blessing to many an American mother!) Fresh sardines are becoming more available and since they are small and the bottom of the food chain, they do not accumulate mercury like larger fish can.¹⁸ And of course, they are traditional in American and Mexican cuisine in a can also, with tomato-based sauces usually! Keep in mind that fresh or frozen is generally better than canned, if for no other reason that the high levels of sodium used as a preservative.

Benefits

Omega-3's have many health benefits. From cardiovascular benefits to ADHD/ADD, Alzheimer's Disease and other brain disorders to anti-inflammation and nourishing the skin! 'Studies also show that women with a high intake of EFAs are at much lower risk of developing breast cancer'.¹⁹ It protects blood vessels from plaque and prevents (and possibly treats) high blood pressure and also aids in respiratory health.²⁰

Recipes

- ❖ See <http://www.whfoods.org> for salmon recipes – very simple, basic recipes with lots of nutritious value! Both easy preparation and low cooking time makes it easy to add to the American diet. (This is an excellent website for simple, healthy whole-food recipes.) I typically just bake it (or broil), with chopped garlic, dill and a drizzle of olive oil on top.
- ❖ Silician-style pan-fried sardines (and other ideas).²¹

5) Number Five: Walnuts: Plant Omega 3's

Benefits

In TCM, walnuts are regarded as good for the Marrow, or Brain. It is now known that walnuts are one of the few plant sources of DHA, the type of Omega-3 fatty acid which research shows benefits Alzheimer's, ADHD and other memory and cognition disorders also – due to the plant Omega-3's!

Recipes

- ❖ Walnuts are eaten mainly as a nut all by itself in the American diet, but it can be a tasty and crunchy addition to many a recipe – wonderful in salads, even walnut oil is a wonderful oil-base for a salad (adds a nutty flavor, of course) and any stir-fry vegetable dish (do not cook; add before serving). But one of my favorite Chinese food dishes (which I hate to admit I love) is the Walnut Shrimp made with glazed walnuts and a honey and mayonnaise sauce that should be a dessert instead of a main dish! Sorry, only healthy recipes provided here, but you can order it at your favorite Chinese restaurant or look for a recipe on the 'net! And of course, we definitely know how to add them to our desserts such as in brownies and holiday desserts too!
- ❖ Warm Mung Bean Salad²² - A lovely little Chinese medicinal recipe favorite with roasted walnuts (both quick and easy to make).

- ❖ Dr. Mao's Anti-aging Brain Mix²³ (be adventurous – mix and match all types of nuts and seeds to make healthy snacks – but use raw varieties, not roasted or salted.)

6) Number Six: Beans and Legumes, especially Soybeans

Beans and legumes are a great source of vegetarian protein and are high in fiber, which helps keep the intestines free of toxins. Fiber also inhibits the liver from producing cholesterol and aids the gallbladder in freeing bile flow, preventing gallstones.²⁴ There are a wide variety of beans, in many sizes, colors and flavors. There are green ones, such as lentils, used in the East Indian cuisine and soybeans, used in Chinese and Japanese cuisine, there are brown and black ones, such as pinto beans and black beans, used in Mexican and Cuban cuisines, there are yellow ones such as garbanzo beans used in Middle Eastern and Greek cuisine, and red beans such as aduki/azuki beans used in Chinese and Japanese cuisine. The options are practically limitless since these are all available to the American consumer!

Two types of legumes are commonly used medicinally. One is soybeans - they contain plant estrogens or phytoestrogens and this may benefit menopausal symptoms, which are due to the sudden decrease in estrogens in women at menopause. Soybeans are also rich in genistein, which like estrogen 'also protects against osteoporosis and other aging symptoms'.²⁵ Soybeans are also now widely available in many forms: from tempeh and tofu, to soy milk and soy nuts, to miso and the whole bean. The whole bean is the natural form and can be found frozen, either shelled or unshelled. In this form, often known as Edamame (Japanese name), it is more versatile and most people will even like! It can be shelled, slightly steamed and salted, and eaten like a fresh nut, or it can be simply added to a variety of dishes: add to a green salad, or to a vegetable stir-fry, or to a vegetable or chicken soup.

It is more beneficial to have soybeans in your general diet for years before menopause to have an overall balancing effect of estrogens vs. suddenly adding them once menopausal symptoms begins, i.e., doing it this way will cause menopausal symptoms to be less severe or even non-existent. Eat in moderation, if you have a thyroid disorder however, or have had a history of an estrogen-dependent breast cancer or if you are male, since a high intake of phytoestrogens can in theory suppress testosterone levels.

Aduki (or azuki) beans are the other legume used medicinally. In Chinese herbal medicine and dietary therapy both, aduki beans are used to help strengthen the digestion and promote urination (for edema, especially). They are a small red bean with a slightly sweet flavor. They are more easily digested than most other beans (but one should soak them overnight before cooking just like other beans). This bean is even used in many desserts in Chinese cuisine and is the second most commonly used bean in Japan (the first one being soybean).

Recipes

- ❖ Aduki Bean Casserole²⁶
- ❖ Black Bean Mole²⁷ - this is a Cuban-based recipe that is very tasty, and has subtle flavors of sweet (has cocoa and cinnamon) and spice (red chile pepper).

7) Number Seven: Spices

Many culinary spices have medicinal qualities, so I 'cheated' here by including an entire category!! There are too many to list completely here, but tumeric, cinnamon, ginger and garlic are a few that have become popular as natural medicinals and all are used in TCM herbal medicine as well.

Benefits

Turmeric or curcuma is used in TCM for its anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory benefits, cinnamon is used for its circulation and warming benefits, ginger is used for nausea, and warming, aiding and strengthening the digestion, and garlic is used for its anti-bacterial effects. Studies now indicate that an active ingredient in garlic 'can prevent atherosclerosis, lower cholesterol, reduce blood clot formation, stimulate the pituitary, regulate blood sugar, and prevent cancer'.²⁸

Recipes

- ❖ Chicken-Fig Tagine (Moroccan stew)²⁹ – a wonderful example of how spices can be combined to create a tasty and healthy recipe (this dish is slightly sweet, due to the combination of figs with sweet potato)!
- ❖ Homemade Ginger Ale.³⁰ Versatile: use the syrup with hot water and drink as a hot tea in winter. (I use organic cane sugar instead of brown sugar.)
- ❖ Celestial Seasonings Bengal Spice herbal tea – has all the warming herbs or spices that I recommend for patients that are cold all the time: cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, black pepper, cloves and nutmeg. Very tasty and excellent in winter especially (purchase at your local supermarket).

8) Number Eight: Bison or Buffalo

This animal protein is low-fat and is a good alternative to our traditional red meat, with the added benefit of being another source of Omega-3's. Accordingly, this food has the same benefits as fish and plants that are full of Omega-3's. It has a taste very similar to beef, although for some the taste is slightly gamey. However, in the form of the ground meat, it can be substituted in many dishes in place of 'hamburger' and the slightly different taste will not be a concern for most people. It is available in most health food stores (usually frozen) and can be found in 'steak' form also.

Benefits

Buffalo has both less fat and less cholesterol than beef. It is also a source of Conjugated Linoleic Acid (CLA), which is another 'good fat' that promotes lean body mass, enhances the effects of insulin, activates the immune system and prevents formation of cholesterol-containing plaques.³¹

Recipes

- ❖ None needed: Just eat like beef!

9) Number Nine: Green Tea

By now, everyone should have heard of how wonderful green tea is for our health! I prefer white tea since it has less caffeine naturally than green tea, but still has the same health benefits. In general, I recommend decaffeinated versions of green or white tea since caffeine is a stimulant and is overused. (Look for tea that is decaffeinated using water and carbon dioxide (CO2) for maximal health benefits.) This overuse and overstimulation causes such symptoms as anxiety, insomnia, nervousness and eventually leads to 'adrenal fatigue', a condition in which the adrenals shut down. This in turn leads to exhaustion and insomnia, or both.

Benefits

It is high in polyphenols, which are antioxidants, and research has also shown that polyphenols 'may increase the activity of antioxidant enzymes in the small intestine, liver, and lungs'. They also may prevent 'cancers of the gastrointestinal tract, including stomach, small intestine, pancreas, and colon; lung cancer; estrogen-related cancers; including most breast cancers; and prostate cancer'.³²

Recipes

- ❖ None needed – just drink up (and avoid those sugar-filled versions in a can). If you want an iced or cold version, make it yourself like ‘sun tea’.

10) Number Ten: Honey

Everyone loves honey, and now you know that it is good for you too! It is more nutritious than refined sugar and can be used in a variety of ways. It is best to purchase raw or unprocessed honey, since processed honey is pasteurized or heated, which harms its nutritional content. Raw honey also will contain trace amounts of bee pollen (benefits described below).

Benefits

Honey contains compounds that ‘exert significant antioxidant activity’ and may also protect against atherosclerosis. Research also suggests that darker honey may be more beneficial than lighter colored ones, due to darker honey having higher ORAC values (i.e., higher antioxidant content).³³ Honey is a natural antibiotic and has long been used for wound-healing. It is still used today topically in burn treatments, for humans and animals alike. Current research has also shown that it may treat stomach ulcers caused by bacteria and may also prevent colon cancer.³⁴

Bees also produce bee pollen, propolis and royal jelly. Bee pollen can help allergies (purchase local versions), provides antioxidant support, enhances energy, helps menopausal symptoms and provides support in chemo and radiation therapy. Bee propolis will help the common cold, respiratory and gastrointestinal infections and will help boost immunity.³⁵ Royal jelly has a cholesterol-lowering effect and will also enhance energy. These ‘foods’ are available in refrigerated sections of health food stores.

Recipes

- ❖ Besides adding to teas, tisanes and coffee?
- ❖ 10-Minute Fig and Fresh Apple Cobbler.³⁶

Summary

I sincerely hope that learning about the benefits of these important foods encourage you to eat a more healthy, whole foods diet. And may the healing benefits of these medicinal foods give you a long and healthy life!

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- ¹ Dean, Stephanie, and Margo True. “The Top 10 feel-good foods.” *Sunset*, January 2010: 84-87.
- ² Ni, Dr. Maoshing. *Secrets of Longevity – Hundreds of Way to Live to be 100*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006, p. 40.
- ³ Vukovic, Laurel. How to Boost Your Immune System with Herbs. *Herb Companion*, November, 2009, p. 44-48.
- ⁴ Vukovic, p. 47.
- ⁵ Adapted from Nam Singh’s medicinal cooking classes, circa 1996. Nam Singh is a Chinese medicinal chef in San Francisco, who amongst many accomplishments, helped with the medicinal recipes in the well-known introductory text to TCM, *Between Heaven and Earth – A Guide to Chinese Medicine* by Harriet Beinfield and Efrem Korngold, 1991.
- ⁶ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 135.
- ⁷ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 107.
- ⁸ Turner, Lisa. “Deep Sea Treasures”. *Vegetarian Times*, January 2010: 42-44.
- ⁹ “Fast & fresh – Recipes from our kitchen and yours, in 30 minutes or less.” *Sunset*, January 2010: 94.
- ¹⁰ Unknown recipe source.
- ¹¹ Recipe from Tamara Wolfson, L.Ac., California State Oriental Medicine Association (CSOMA) conference, 2005.
- ¹² Murray, Michael, and Pizzorno, Joseph, et al. *The Encyclopedia of Healing Foods*. New York: Atria Books, 2005, p. 142.
- ¹³ Murray, et al, p. 269-270.
- ¹⁴ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 93.
- ¹⁵ Recipe from Tamara Wolfson, L.Ac., California State Oriental Medicine Association (CSOMA) conference, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Ni, Dr. Maoshing. *Second Spring*. New York: Free Press, p 109.
- ¹⁷ Nestle, Marion. *What to Eat*. New York: North Point Press, pp. 201-202.
- ¹⁸ Dean, et al, *Sunset*, January 2010, p. 84.
- ¹⁹ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 122.
- ²⁰ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 23.

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- ²¹ Dean, et al, *Sunset*, January 2010, p. 84.
- ²² Nam Singh's recipe, circa 1997.
- ²³ Ni, Dr. Maoshing. *Second Spring*, p 109.
- ²⁴ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 54.
- ²⁵ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 131.
- ²⁶ Haigh, Charlotte. *The Top 100 Immunity Boosters*. London: Duncan Baird Publishers Ltd., p. 75.
- ²⁷ Berkelhammer, Lisa, L.Ac. *The Berkelhammer Health Letter*, circa 1996.
- ²⁸ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 22.
- ²⁹ *Relish* magazine (newspaper clipping), circa 2009.
- ³⁰ *Vegetarian Times*, November 2005, p. 59.
- ³¹ Murray, et al, p. 580.
- ³² Murray, et al, p. 667.
- ³³ Murray, et al, p. 650-52.
- ³⁴ Ni, *Secrets of Longevity*, p. 39.
- ³⁵ Murray, et al, p. 650-52.
- ³⁶ Recipe from <http://www.whfoods.org>.

Other References

<http://www.whfoods.org/> The website of 'The George Mateljan Foundation, a not-for-profit foundation with no commercial interests' with great simple healthy, whole foods recipes. Daily email newsletter subscription available.

Pamplona-Roger, George D., M.D. *Encyclopedia of Foods and their Healing Power – A Guide to Food Science and Diet Therapy*. Madrid: Editorial Safeliz, S.L. A very lovely set of 3 volumes, with excellent information and graphic design. However, it is very expensive (as encyclopedias typically are).

Pitchford, Paul. *Healing with Whole Foods*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2002. A classic reference regarding diet and nutrition from the perspective of TCM.