

KITCHEN OF YOUTH

Forget the lotions and potions. Your best bet for staving off the wear and tear of ageing is the pantry, says nutritionist Catherine Saxelby.

VEGETABLES

Broccoli This cruciferous vegetable protects against bowel cancer and its high fibre content keeps you regular so try to eat it every second day. Steam, boil or microwave it until just tender-crisp to retain vitamin C and folate, then dress with a splash of olive oil or balsamic vinegar. It's great topped with toasted sesame seeds or chilli flakes.

Spinach Packed with betacarotene, fibre, vitamins C, E and K, and several B vitamins, spinach also has a swag of minerals, including potassium, magnesium and a little iron. It contains two antioxidants, lutein and zeaxanthin, which research says can preserve your eyesight and slow the progression of macular degeneration, the major cause of blindness in older Australians. Consume it two to three times a week as baby spinach leaves in a mixed salad or throw a handful into a stir-fry or lamb curry at the end of cooking.

BEVERAGES

Green tea This is the favourite drink on the Japanese island of Okinawa, which boasts the highest incidence of centenarians (people living to 100) in the world. More than a dozen studies show that tea can reduce the risk of heart problems, may prevent several cancers and can maintain strong bones in older people. Tea's antioxidants, a group called flavonoids, appear to be responsible. In addition, a natural amino acid in tea called L-theanine can increase the alpha waves in your brain, improving your ability to concentrate and helping you feel relaxed yet alert. Plus, you're getting a low-caffeine hot beverage; tea, green and black, has one-third to one-half of the caffeine of coffee.

FRUIT

Lemons Packed with vitamin C, folate, fibre and antioxidants, lemons are also rich in potassium, which counteracts salt's damage to the kidneys and heart. Both rind and juice contain limonene, an antioxidant that can fight off cancer. Squeeze the juice liberally on fish and prawns, use it to make a tangy salad dressing or add the rind to sauces.

Blueberries These contain anthocyanins – plant pigments that destroy free radicals that would otherwise damage DNA and set the scene for cancer. A 200-gram punnet of blueberries has a tiny 395 kilojoules, virtually no fat and plenty of vitamins and minerals.

DAIRY

Yoghurt This dairy favourite has been associated with long life since the early 1900s, when Russian microbiologist Dr Elie Metchnikoff claimed that its live lactobacillus bacteria (which, today, we call probiotics) exerted a key influence on the intestine. Yoghurt is more easily digested and absorbed than milk so your body takes in more of its protein, B vitamins (particularly the riboflavin needed for healthy skin and eyes) and calcium.

SPICES AND FLAVOURINGS

Cinnamon Research conducted in Pakistan in 2003 found that half a teaspoon of cinnamon a day kept blood sugar low for 20 days. Sprinkle it liberally on your breakfast porridge or yoghurt.

Turmeric In Indian medicine, this orange-yellow spice, and curry essential, is said to aid digestion. In Western medicine, it is being studied for its ability to inhibit cancer growth and lower inflammation (which may play a role in damaging brain cells). Its active ingredient, curcumin, is an antioxidant and anti-inflammatory agent.

Garlic Fresh garlic will kill off bacteria and viruses, thanks to its high levels of sulphur, potassium and phosphorus. Cooked, it can thin the blood and reduce the bad LDL cholesterol. Roast a whole bulb of garlic and make a dressing or sauce from the soft pulp.

Ginger Ginger can boost blood circulation and metabolism. Many swear by ginger tablets to prevent motion sickness but it's also been trialled for arthritis pain. It offers vitamins and antioxidants for few kilojoules. Add fresh grated ginger to a vegetable stir-fry.



NUTS AND SEEDS

Almonds The creamy-tasting nuts contain 28 essential nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, fatty acids, fibre and protein. A small handful (30 grams) provides nearly 80 per cent of your recommended daily intake of vitamin E, the antioxidant that's key in anti-wrinkle creams. Known for lowering blood cholesterol and the risk of heart disease, almonds also contain arginine, a protein building block that relaxes blood vessels and keeps blood flowing. Make them your favourite between-meal snack.

Flaxseeds Also called linseeds, flaxseeds are a storehouse of omega-3s, those brain-friendly fatty acids that can halt the decline of cognition in advancing years and may also help maintain good eyesight. Add these shiny dark-brown seeds to muesli or muffin mix or shop for soy-linseed bread and flaxseed oil. Flaxseeds are rich in lignans (which may help to reduce the risk of hormone-related cancers, such as breast cancer) and plant oestrogens, which may help ease hot flushes during menopause.

LEGUMES

Soy beans Soy is a nutritional all-rounder for longevity. Its two main isoflavones (natural plant hormones that mimic the female hormone oestrogen) are valuable to menopausal women. Breast, cervical and prostate cancers have been reduced in people who eat soy regularly. Soy protein lowers the bad LDL cholesterol and prevents arteries from clogging. It provides lots of fibre, high-quality protein, omega-3 fats and a number of minerals.

ANIMAL PROTEINS

Salmon Omega-3 fats from oily fish such as salmon are the ultimate anti-ageing nutrient. They maintain good eyesight, lower blood pressure and triglycerides (a blood fat like cholesterol) and reduce blood clotting. They also reduce the inflammation of conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. Eat fresh or canned salmon, or other oily fish, two to three times a week.

Lamb Older people need more vitamin B12 (as absorption slows with age) and possibly B6 and folic acid. Lean lamb is good for all three as well as providing top-quality protein (important for maintaining muscle mass). It contains iron, which prevents anaemia, and zinc, which builds a strong immune system.

Eggs Younger people get enough vitamin D through sunshine but there is a 60 per cent decline in its manufacture in older people. Eggs are one of the few food sources of vitamin D, which boosts your immune system and works with calcium to prevent osteoporosis.

FATS

Extra virgin olive oil With its "good" monounsaturated fat, this is your best heart protector. It's worth paying a little more for the green-tinged cold-pressed olive oil. Because it hasn't been heated, the oil maintains more of its phenolic antioxidants (which can thin the blood and keep it free-flowing) and squalene, a natural compound with the ability to lower cholesterol. Splash it over salads and char-grilled eggplant, capsicum or zucchini.

GRAINS

Oats If you want to live to 100 and be in good shape, this is the grain with everything. It's high in beta glucan, a soluble fibre that lowers cholesterol; it has a low glycaemic index (GI) of 42, meaning it delivers carbohydrates slowly to the bloodstream so will help you keep diabetes at bay; and is a good alternative if you can't eat wheat. Oats top up your B vitamins, especially thiamin and niacin, as well as minerals such as phosphorus, potassium and magnesium (which helps steady the rhythm of the heart).

Rye First cultivated in 1700 BC, this grain can keep your heart pumping longer and your gums stronger. According to research from Finland, rye bread is effective for lowering cholesterol. Canadian research has found that wholegrains such as rye may reduce the likelihood of periodontitis, or gum disease, that can occur with age. Rye has a low GI, is high in soluble fibre and contains lignans. It boasts more antioxidants than wheat, including vitamin E, phenolic and phytic acids, selenium, copper, zinc and manganese. Rye crispbreads or dark rye breads, such as black bread, pumpernickel and *Schinkenbrot*, are the easiest way to up your intake.

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