

## Produce Superheroes

*"Let your food be your medicine, let your medicine be your food."*

*~Hippocrates*

The term **antioxidant** is prevalent in today's health-conscious society. The action antioxidants take in our bodies is to combat against free radicals. Free radicals are unstable oxygen molecules created in our bodies' cells. They are formed during normal chemical processes, or can be formed by environmental factors such as heat, radiation, smoke, alcohol and certain pollutants. Antioxidants are vitamins that are found in fruits and vegetables (such as broccoli, yams and blueberries), and wage battle in our bodies every time we eat them—in our organs, muscles, and skin, fighting against assaults by free radicals. Without the presence of these "produce superheroes", free radicals may wreak havoc on our bodies cell tissue, increasing the risk of developing life-threatening ailments like cancer and heart disease.

One group of antioxidants with powers that go beyond their usual capabilities is known as **phytochemicals**, which capture and disable troublesome free radicals. One group of phytochemicals, called **phytosterols**, can block the uptake of harmful cholesterol; another group, **flavonoids**, works against allergies and ulcers; a third, **glucosinolates**, activates liver enzymes that detoxify our blood.

**Sweet Potatoes** contain more than four times the recommended daily allowance of beta-carotene (ounce for ounce, they top carrots in their content of this powerful protector against cancer and heart disease.)

The tuber also contains high levels of vitamins C and E, which bolster the immune system. Other nutrient bonuses: plenty of vitamin A, potassium, iron, B vitamins, and fiber. Despite their rich taste, these potatoes are fat- and cholesterol-free; a medium sweet potato has only about 130 calories.

**Black beans** are rich in phytoestrogens, which may reduce the risk of breast cancer, cool down symptoms of menopause, slow osteoporosis, and inhibit heart disease. Black beans are a great source of high-quality protein, especially for vegetarians. Like most legumes. Black beans supply a multitude of minerals, including copper, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, and zinc. A good source of folic acid, black beans can help protect against birth defects.

Packed with carotenoids, **kale** has one-third more antioxidant capacity than spinach and twice as much as broccoli. Some researchers theorize that chlorophyll, the chemical that gives plants like kale their green color, may also help prevent the mutation of cells into pre-cancerous versions. Ounce for ounce, fresh kale has as much calcium as whole milk and is rich in fiber, iron, and vitamins A, C, and B6. With such a low caloric cost—just 50 fat-free calories in 3 ½ ounces—kale is a nutritional bargain.

It's their blue color that makes them so good for you: Anthocyanins, the phytochemical pigments responsible for **blueberries'** color, can reduce inflammation, strengthen collagen in tendons and cartilage, inhibit thrombosis (a factor in the development of atherosclerosis), and act as an antioxidant.

Blueberries have the highest antioxidant capacity of 40 common fruits and vegetables—three times more than spinach alone. Blueberries contain ellagic acid, another potential cancer fighter—and one that won't break down when cooked.

Like cranberries, blueberries are also rich in a component that fights urinary-tract infections. This substance acts as an anti-adhesive, blocking bacteria from clinging to the urinary-tract wall and thereby reducing the risk of infection.