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WHAT FOODS ARE AS EFFECTIVE AS SUPPLEMENTS FOR IMPROVING YOUR HEALTH?



When we get into improving our health and well-being, any reputable source is going to try and simplify everything into three or four categories:

- ✓ Exercise; get some physical activity and don't be a couch potato.
- ✓ Diet; eat healthy and don't lose your mind while doing so.
- ✓ Lifestyle; practice some basic tips that benefit health that don't fall into the former two groups (sleep, etc.)

Depending on who you ask, "supplements" themselves will be the fourth category. In other words, things you put into your mouth to improve your health that aren't food.

But wait? That's what your diet is, right? Putting things in your mouth to be healthy? Why are supplements a standalone category rather than just a subsection there, and why do some people have such drastic differences in views between supplements and food?

Mostly marketing to be honest, heralding supplements as their own category alongside diet and exercise does wonders to the sales. Supplements also tend to be marketed similarly to how pharmaceuticals are, which boils down to "Take this drug or supplement for this specific purpose," which gives people more reassurance that they're effective. Food, on the other hand, you're just told to eat because "it's tasty" or "it's healthy."

All supplements have, at one point, been something that people ate in their diets.

So, really, supplements should just be thought of as a modified or concentrated version of a regular food.

And there are some things in your diet that, for all intents and purposes, are just as potent as supplements and can be treated as such.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FOOD AND SUPPLEMENTS?

Each food is unique; different structure, different taste, and different response to cooking. These are due to a very large amount of unique compounds in these foods giving them different properties.

But if all this was on the nutritional label then each product would have its own pamphlet; some corners need to be cut for simplicity and a lot of the unique "bioactives" aren't labelled.

"Bioactive" refers to something that is biologically (bio-) active in the body. In other words, things that you put in the body and they do specific things. Technically things like Vitamin C are still bioactives, but they got grandfathered past the term and are just called vitamins.

The bioactives that aren't vitamins or minerals tend to be called "nutraceuticals," since the approach to researching and recommending them is similar to pharmaceuticals (except we got the "nutrition" prefix slapped on there).

There are thousands of these little guys. Some aren't interesting, some are great, and when a new one pops up, the first step in research is to isolate it so we can study whether or not it's something to even care about.

After that, take a step back and see if it's even practical and safe. Do we need to spend millions to patent an extraction process, source raw material, and make supplements for this nutraceutical or can people, y'know, just eat the food?

To answer this, we need to see:

- ✓ What's the dose that exerts benefits, and is it the same dose that's in the food?
- ✓ Does the food itself behave the same way as the isolated compound?
- ✓ Can we demonstrate, scientifically, that the food itself provides these benefits?

If a food can be used instead of supplements, that's of course the way to go. It's simpler, cheaper, and more affordable than encapsulated supplements ever could be.

WHAT "SUPPLEMENTS" CAN YOU GET FROM FOOD?

With all that out of the way, what are some examples of things that science has shown you can benefit from using the doses found in your kitchen; while still being palatable, of course?

There's quite a bit actually, let's break them down:

Garlic

Garlic has a long history in traditional medicine for pretty much everything. From blood disorders to infections to aging itself; garlic is even thought to be the first thing ever to be used as a performance enhancer!

It's still effective though, and most studies looking at the effects of garlic on various properties tend to use aged garlic extract at around 600 to 1,200 mg. This is somewhat equivalent to about 1 to 3 cloves a day, depending on the size, and is a dose sufficient to have effects in humans when you just crush the garlic and eat it.

As a side note on garlic usage in the kitchen, most stuff works. Just make sure not to heat the clove for long periods of time before breaking it. Sixty seconds in the microwave, 45 minutes in the oven, or boiling garlic in water can all destroy the alliinase enzyme that turns the parent compound in garlic, allicin, into the more bioactive compounds.

Heating will destroy the enzyme, preventing the conversion from occurring, but if you crush/chop/mince it beforehand and let it sit then the heat no longer becomes an issue.

That being said it's not like the garlic becomes useless, allicin itself still does stuff, it just becomes different; more of a basic antioxidant rather than something with cool and unique properties.

Garlic has small benefits to pretty much everything, most notably when it comes to blood flow, inflammation, and perhaps immunity. While supplements of aged garlic extracts may be a bit better, simply eating 1 to 3 cloves a day will suffice.

Blueberries

Blueberries, and all dark blue-black berries in general, are bundles of what are known as anthocyanins. These guys are investigated for many things but recently their antioxidant properties have led them to be looked into for cognition.

Studies conducted on blueberries and cognition show promise in improving memory in older adults and youth, with a potential extra benefit to mood.

Furthermore, benefits have been seen for reducing oxidation and improving immunity (natural killer cells).

All of those studies have not really used blueberry supplements that you buy on the market but, rather, food products. Concentrated blueberry juices, frozen blueberries, or those blueberries physically crushed into a powder and freeze dried (which is essentially what supplements are, to be fair).

While the dose isn't necessarily small, it seems the highest doses are around 250 grams of fresh blueberries or a dose similar to that. If you can press it into juice it would still work and, if you want to buy frozen (which might actually be better than fresh) then 175 grams would suffice for the high dose.

Blueberries seem to have benefits to mood, cognition, and maybe even immunity. These benefits are seen from anywhere between a quarter to a full cup of fresh blueberries; juices and frozen blueberries also work well.

Cranberries

Cranberries have been known to have a specific interaction with urinary health in recent years, getting some high-quality evidence to support the use of cranberry supplements for this purpose.

However, does this apply to cranberries themselves? Could the benefits seen in these trials translate to oral consumption of cranberries in a nice homemade tart?

Well, it seems benefits have been seen with 500 mg cranberry fruit powder. We're not talking some major extraction process going on, it was just dehydrated fruits put into capsules!

This fruit powder has been seen to be effective elsewhere at the same half-gram dose while another study just literally used dried cranberries; 1,500 mg every day, a pathetically small amount when it comes to actually eating them.

Cranberries do have a water content of about 87%, like most berries, so if we're going to estimate a weight for fresh cranberries (based on 1,500 mg dried) then it'd be about 11 grams.

There is reasonable evidence that a small handful of cranberries carries the same benefits seen in trials using cranberry supplements, which are essentially just dehydrated fruit powder. Fresh juice can also work.

Black Cumin (*Nigella sativa*)

Nigella sativa, also known as black cumin, is a seed that's been used as a spice and is also commonly seen as a dietary supplement in the form of black seed oil.

While the seeds are about a third oil before any processing occurs they're also mighty tasty in my opinion; when ground they taste like black pepper. Plus, some studies have been conducted eating three grams of the seeds themselves that have found mild benefits on many parameters (including an increase in overall mood).

This improvement in mood has also been seen in youth and there seems to be a pretty nice link between the oil component of nigella, at doses between 500 to 1,000 mg, and improved asthma control and lung power.

Honestly, while there's less evidence on black cumin than garlic they do seem to offer similar benefits; they aren't super amazing on any one parameter but, damn, they're researched in a lot of things.

Not the type of thing you want to go and get a dedicated supplement for but when the seeds are a third oil and even the highest doses seen in studies (about two grams of the oil) are replicated with six grams of something that tastes like black pepper.

Nigella sativa, or black cumin, seems to have a myriad of somewhat minor health benefits mainly around mood and immunity (asthma in particular). The doses used in studies are achievable using the seeds as a spice between 2 to 6 grams a day.

WHAT "SUPPLEMENTS" CAN YOU NOT GET FROM FOOD?

Right, so now that we've established how there are a lot of foods that you can get benefits from why should we even supplement them in the first place? Shouldn't supplementation just be used for things that aren't normally found in the food supply?

Well, that's the thing. ALL supplements need to come from natural sources (according to the legalities of supplements; synthetic compounds are a no-no) so, really, the only times you should seek a supplement are due to:

- ✔ It's more convenient to take a capsule or powder than it is to eat the thing itself (like Whey+).

- ✓ You just don't want to eat the thing itself because you don't like the taste of it.
- ✓ The "good stuff" in the food is just at such a low level that it needs to be concentrated. (like the creatine and L-carnitine in RECHARGE).

Convenience is why a lot of people buy Genesis since we just put a bunch of good stuff in a powder so you don't need to go out and hunt it down.

Taste is why a lot of people buy fish oil supplements and why we put bacopa monnieri into capsules; some people just don't like fish while bacopa is, oh god, it's a swamp herb and it tastes just like you'd expect.

Concentration is why people buy multivitamins like Triumph since it's hard to get such high levels of Vitamin D or Vitamin K without downing cod liver oil and nattō; two food products that are acquired tastes.

But, despite supplements being the better options in some cases people still try to work things out in the kitchen. As we've shown there are tons of times where it does work and you can save money but, sometimes, we're not so lucky.

Turmeric

Turmeric is the main source of curcumin, the "curry extract" supplement that's been studied to an incredible degree in the past decade. There is also some curcumin in ginger but it's an even lower amount; not too many people associate curcumin with ginger because of it.

The reason they don't care is because getting curcumin through foods is a lost cause for most (not all) of the reasons we supplement curcumin for.

Curcumin supplements either use 500 mg of curcumin, with an absorption enhancer, or up to 2,000 mg of curcumin, with an absorption enhancer. At best, turmeric has 40 mg/g in the rhizomes (vertical root) and 2 mg/g in the roots.

The majority of the benefits seen with curcumin come from high doses paired with absorption enhancers. Due to the relatively low levels of curcumin in turmeric and its low absorption most aspects of curcumin do NOT apply to the spice.

If you want to get the majority of the benefits, you need to take a supplement.

Do note that I said, “majority of benefits.” Even if curcumin is only 1% absorbed that other 99% is still in your body, chilling in your gut, and in this area turmeric ingestion could actually be kinda nice for your gut as some wang-jangled probiotic. Still a bit of hope for curry lovers!

Capsaicin

Capsaicin is the first molecule to be called “pepper extract”, before piperine came onto the scene, and is the first molecule researched to help explain why spicy things are spicy.

It was also one of the first dietary components to interact with channels, rather than receptors, which isn’t something you see much when it comes to dietary supplements. In other words, it behaves in a unique way, so scientists decided to do ton of research on it and, at times, some people assume that more evidence means better effects.

However, most studies these days look at the usage of capsaicin in patches for the role of reducing pain, since it can upset the stomachs of even healthy people, and there’s at least one study showing that it could have a localized effect in the mouth (ironically, for burning mouth syndrome).

The patches were created because, simply put, a high dose of capsaicin was required to (maybe) reduce the perception of pain when taken orally and it just caused frequent stomach distress at that dose.

Capsaicin was one of the first pain-reducing supplements looked into and, while it could work at times, required a high dose and had side-effects. These studies were different from simply adding some hot peppers to a diet and, nowadays, capsaicin for pain isn’t even taken orally.

THE BOTTOM LINE ON SUPPLEMENTS VS. FOOD

There are indeed many things that, while not “functional foods,” simply have benefits on their own and you don’t need to buy supplements for.

You can if you want but there’s a certain sense of freedom that you can get when the amount of supplements taken is minimized in favor of whole foods that act like supplements; it’s pretty much a win-win to me.

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