

All you need to eat

Forget vitamin pills. 'Superfoods' are the real thing – and they pack a bigger nutritional punch. So which are best? **Anastasia Stephens** reports



Eating well:
(clockwise
from left):
wheatgrass;
a sprout; a
superfood
drink; a blue-
green algae
supplement

DAVID
SANDISON

groups and, these days, you'll find they've given the vitamin jar the boot. "Superfoods" are the big nutrition thing – just witness the rise of Gillian McKeith. Champion of fashionable seaweeds and algae, she's the public face of superfoods, with a product range, a string of books and a television series behind her.

And we're not talking about your humble broccoli or nuts. Instead, it's foods such as spirulina, wheatgrass or sprouts that are so packed with nutrients, a mere handful should give you the daily dose of vitamins and minerals you need.

One reason for the popularity of superfoods is that reports on vitamins are so confusing – one minute they protect against heart disease; the next they increase the risk. Then a study comes out suggesting they might not work at all.

The argument for superfoods is that, as natural food sources, they are safe, easily absorbed and – if you believe the claims – highly effective at enhancing overall health. "There's a wealth of evidence that if you take vitamins in their food state, you need less, because they work more effi-

Jobst, Professor of Complimentary Medicine at Oxford Brookes University.

Another scientist points out that synthetic vitamins are rather different from those in food or plants. "If a nutrient or mineral is very different to its natural form, it will be hard to absorb and could put extra stress on the body," says Eric Lewellyn, a biochemist in Worcestershire who researches supplements. "In nature, vitamin C comes in a package with up to 100 co-factors – this means you can absorb it properly. On its own, you'd need much more vitamin C. Equally, calcium sold as calcium carbonate, or chalk, is very hard to digest."

As a source of "growing vitamins", your superfoods come pre-packed for optimal digestion. Not only that, but they're a source of nutrients you may not find in any modern diet.

But critics argue that superfoods are an expensive way of getting your daily dose of vitamins and minerals. "I'd like to see more evidence to support superfood supplements," says Anna Denny, a scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation. "Eating plenty of wholegrains, fish, fruit and vegetables should supply you with all the nutrition you need."

So what are the superfoods, how do they claim to help and are they worth the cost?

Why eat it?

Spirulina and chlorella are a better protein source than meat and they're packed with vitamins and all eight essential fatty acids. But unlike animal proteins – which have to be broken down into amino acids before we can use them – proteins from algae can be used immediately.

Does it work?

One study has found that regular use of chlorella helps guard against heart disease, boosts immunity, reduces blood pressure and lowers cholesterol. Spirulina has been found to stimulate blood-cell production and is approved in Russia as a "medicine food" to treat blood-cell depletion due to radiation sickness.

Recommended

Lifestream's Bioactive Spirulina powder (12.99 for 100g) and Chlorella capsules (£15.99 for 300) from health food shops.

THE SUPER-GRASSES

Why eat them?

Wheatgrass and barleygrass are rich sources of chlorophyll and other plant pigments, which have antioxidant and anti-ageing properties.

Do they work?

Research has found chlorophyll helps to rebuild red blood cells and boost immunity. Barley grass has anti-inflammatory properties; a

particularly effective for helping those with inflammatory bowel disease, although it only involved 18 patients.

Recommended

Fresh wheatgrass juice from Planet Organic in London or from juice bars. Or Barley and Wheat Grass powder by Earthrise (£15.99 for 100g).

ACAI

Why eat it?

Acai is the trendy new superfruit from Brazil. A juice bar just for Acai juice has opened in Brick Lane, and it can be found in juice and capsule form in most health food stores. Native Indians have eaten acai for centuries. It provides 30 times the anthocyanins of berries and red wine and has all the fatty acids of olive oil.

Does it work?

Studies have found anthocyanins help prevent blood clots, improve blood circulation, relax blood vessels and prevent arteriosclerosis. Acai has been found to help reduce prostate enlargement.

Recommended

Dried acai powder (£19.99 for 78g) from Synergy UK (0800 197 8550).

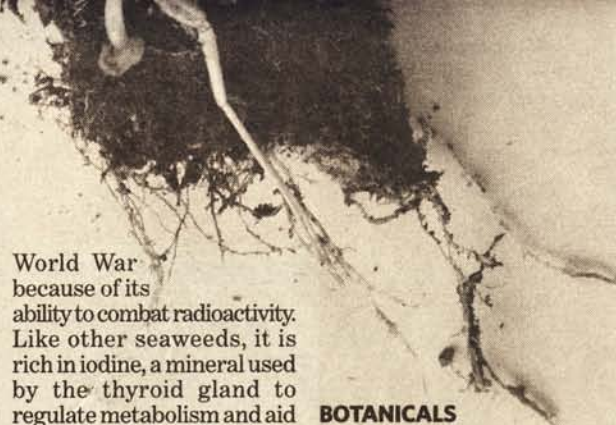
ARCTIC SEAWEED

Why eat it?

Seaweeds have a rich mineral content and may bind to heavy metals like mercury. "The nutritional content of seaweed varies, as in vegetables. Wild Arctic wracks are the richest," says Simon Ranger, who distributes it in the UK.

Does it work?

Eaten by the Laps and Norwegians, Arctic seaweed came to the attention of researchers after the Second



World War because of its ability to combat radioactivity. Like other seaweeds, it is rich in iodine, a mineral used by the thyroid gland to regulate metabolism and aid weight loss.

Recommended

Seagreens capsules or granules (£14.75 for 60 capsules, 01444 400 403).

SPROUTS

Why eat them?

Brimming with the energy and the nutrients needed to turn seeds into fully-fledged plants, sprouts are the nutritional equivalent of a rocket-launcher. "When a seed, bean or pulse has sprouted, all nutrients and enzymes are activated, which is why they're a great energy source," says Linda Carney, a nutritionist.

Do they work?

A single handful should provide the equivalent of a multi-vitamin and mineral supplement, with plenty of enzymes thrown in that can help with digestion.

Recommended

Sprouts are available from supermarkets and health food shops. Or you can grow your own from dried pulses.

BOTANICALS

Why eat them?

Used in traditional medicine for thousands of years, plant extracts are a brilliant source of phytochemicals – substances whose beneficial effects match, or even outstrip, vitamins'. Although they're found in most fruit and vegetables, plant medicines such as yarrow, hawthorn, red clover, ginger and turmeric are particularly rich sources – which is why they're appearing in superfood supplements.

Do they work?

Phytochemicals from these plants such as anthocyanins, beta-carotenes and flavonoids are proving more powerful agents in keeping the heart, blood vessels and cells healthy. They also fight infection, boost immunity and help maintain and restore tissue and cellular functions.

Recommended

Fushi's herbal tonics such as the antioxidant tincture (£14.95 for 100ml) and alertness tincture (£14.95 for 100ml, www.fushi.co.uk).

