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Foods that Work Together: Pairings for Better Nutrient Absorption

We all want to get the most out of our food, especially when we are being mindful of the food we are choosing, where it comes from, and how it affects our health. Pairing complementary foods can help you get more nutrition from the food that you eat, because certain nutrients are better absorbed and utilized by our bodies when combined with others. Here are a few examples of nutrient combinations that can help you maximize nutrient absorption.



Iron-rich foods and vitamin C. Our bodies need iron to carry oxygen, but the non-heme iron found in plant foods can be difficult to absorb. Vitamin C greatly enhances iron absorption, so pairing sources of iron with vitamin C is a good idea. Spinach is a great source of iron, so a spinach salad with citrus or berries, both high in vitamin C, is a great combination. Try combining hummus, which is high in iron, with bell peppers, another good source of vitamin C. Other good iron and vitamin C combos are lentils and tomatoes or oatmeal and berries.

Fat-soluble vitamins and healthy fats. Some vitamins, like A, D, K, and E, are fat-soluble, which means they require dietary fat to be properly absorbed. Green salads and roasted vegetables, which contain many of the fat-soluble vitamins, can be topped with vinaigrette made with healthy fat like olive oil. Sweet potatoes, a very good source of vitamin A, can

be topped with avocado or some Greek yogurt. Roasted carrots, which are rich in vitamin A, can be drizzled with olive oil.

Turmeric and black pepper. Turmeric has been used for centuries for its health benefits which are now starting to be supported by research. It is known to contain curcumin, a potent antioxidant that may help reduce inflammation and joint pain, control blood sugar, and prevent cellular damage. However, curcumin is not well-absorbed in our intestines. Piperine, the active compound in black pepper, enhances curcumin absorption. Curcumin is also fat soluble, so eating a little fat along with the meal will enhance absorption further. Golden milk is a beverage made with milk (dairy or non-dairy), ground turmeric, cracked black pepper, and some coconut oil or other fat. It contains all the components to get the most out of your turmeric. You could also season roasted vegetables with turmeric and add a little olive oil and black pepper. Or prepare soups and curries that have turmeric, black pepper, and some healthy fat.

Beans and brown rice. This is not only budget-friendly, but also fiber-rich and contains all of the essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein) that our bodies need to function. No wonder this combination has been a staple in so many cultures (and lean college years) to provide valuable nutrition and full bellies.

(Continued on page 2)



Foods that Work Together (continued)

Tomatoes and healthy fats. Tomatoes contain lycopene, a powerful antioxidant linked to heart and prostate health. Lycopene is best absorbed with some fat, so drizzle that olive oil on your tomatoes! Caprese salads are a great option, as are marinara or other tomato-based sauces. If Italian food isn't your thing, salsa and avocado would also be a great choice.



Vitamin D and calcium. Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium, which is vital for bone health. Vitamin D happens to be one of the vitamins we can make—our skin synthesizes vitamin D in the presence of sunlight—but many people don't get enough sun exposure to make adequate vitamin D. That is why milk and many cereal products are fortified with vitamin D—to ensure people consume enough and to enhance calcium absorption from those foods. Cereal and milk is an easy and familiar example. Fatty fish, like salmon, is a good source of vitamin D, so pair that with a source of calcium like broccoli or kale. A tuna melt sandwich would also be rich in vitamin D from the tuna, and calcium from the melted cheese.

Pairing foods strategically can improve the absorption of vitamins, minerals, and beneficial plant compounds, helping you get the most nutritional value from your meals. Simple combinations such as spinach with strawberries, tomatoes with olive oil, or turmeric with black pepper can make a meaningful difference in supporting long-term health.

Are you passionate about...

Health & Wellness, Cooking, Gardening,
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Become a Wellness Ambassador for your campus!

Contact Margaret Clayton,
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Protecting Your Aging Brain: The Roles of Sleep & Exercise

As we age, our cognitive abilities, like memory, reasoning, and sensory processing, may start to decline. However, there are many things we can do to keep our brains young and sharp. A good place to start is by focusing on overall health—maintaining a healthy weight, keeping blood sugar under control, and sustaining healthy cholesterol and blood pressure levels.

Mental stimulation, like playing puzzles and games, and being social can both help. New research also supports that two key factors in preventing degenerative brain disorders are things we (hopefully) do every day: sleeping and being active.



Sleep has long been a mystery to science. All creatures need sleep, but during sleep, we are less aware of our surroundings and are more vulnerable to predators. So it goes to reason that whatever benefit sleep confers to survival is so great that it outweighs the increased risk of predation.

A study from Northwestern University in fruit flies suggests that sleep, in particular deep sleep, has an “ancient, restorative” power to clear waste from our brains. On the surface, fruit flies may seem to be quite a distant relative to humans, but they are commonly used in sleep and circadian rhythm studies because the nerve cells that control their sleep cycles are actually very similar to our own. The researchers injected the flies with a dye and observed that flies whose sleep was interrupted were not only less able to clear the dye from their systems, but also more susceptible to traumatic injury. They concluded that a core function of deep sleep is waste clearance, and that waste clearance from our brains could be essential in maintaining brain health and preventing neurodegenerative diseases.

There is also new research reinforcing the idea that physical exercise is essential for brain health. Refreshingly, the study focused on older African Americans, a group usually not well-represented in research studies. The researchers from Rutgers recruited participants who were generally healthy, mostly in their 60s, and described as sedentary. They were given health and fitness checks, cognitive tests, and some agreed to have their brain activity scanned. They were broken into two groups, one that participated in hour-long exercise classes twice a week for 20 weeks, and one that did not. After this period, they again tested the participants’ cognitive function, and scanned brain activity.

In the exercise group, their brain scans showed more synchronized activity than the brain scans of the sedentary group. In addition, when areas of the medial temporal lobe lit up, other areas would light up simultaneously. The researchers were especially interested in this part of the brain because it is responsible for memory and its function tends to decline with age. They concluded that the brains of the participants in the exercise group showed a “youthful flexibility” that was not seen in the brains of the sedentary group. The subjects who exercised also outperformed the others on cognitive tests, supporting the results of the brain scans.



We all age, if we are lucky, and we cannot prevent some of the changes that occur as that happens. However, there are clearly habits that can slow and possibly even reverse some of these changes, keeping us sharper, healthier, and more engaged in life. Add preventing mental decline to the long list of benefits we get from exercise. And get a good night’s sleep!

Incorporating Fermented Foods into Your Diet

By now, we have all heard about the importance of gut health. Eating a high-fiber, plant-based diet that includes fermented foods is one of the most surefire ways to maintain a healthy gut. However, some fermented foods can be challenging to incorporate into the average diet. Here are some ideas to add fermented foods to your daily meal rotation.

Yogurt can of course be eaten as is, or incorporated into smoothies, oatmeal, or fruit bowls. But yogurt also serves as a good substitute for mayonnaise or sour cream in many recipes. While sour cream is initially made with beneficial bacteria, most commercial brands are pasteurized before being sold and therefore don't contain the living organisms that yogurt does. Plain Greek yogurt can be used to top baked potatoes, added to tacos, burritos, and chili, used in place of mayo in potato salad, or used as a base for dips. Yogurt can also be used in baking, but keep in mind that cooking fermented foods to high temperatures will kill the beneficial microbes they contain.



Pickled vegetables are a widely enjoyed fermented food found in many cultures around the world. Kimchi from Korea, sauerkraut from eastern Europe, and curtido from El Salvador are just a few examples. Unfortunately, most mass-produced, shelf-stable pickles are preserved using vinegar and high-heat pasteurization, a sterilization process that kills all beneficial bacteria. To buy pickled vegetables that contain live, gut-healthy cultures, look for refrigerated products instead of shelf-stable ones. These crunchy, salty, tangy vegetables can be added to sandwiches, salads, and as garnishes for many dishes. Sauerkraut is a wonderful accompaniment to grilled or roasted meats. Curtido is traditionally used on pupusas

but can also be added to tacos, burritos, or sandwiches. Kimchi is amazing on grilled cheese sandwiches, or folded into scrambled eggs, fried rice, soup, or noodles.

Unpasteurized apple cider vinegar also contains live active cultures. The cloudy deposit at the bottom of the bottle is known as the “mother,” and it contains the live organisms that created the vinegar. Apple cider vinegar can be used any place vinegar would be used—in salad dressings, sauces, and marinades. It can also be diluted in water or seltzer and consumed as a tonic. Not only does apple cider vinegar contain gut-friendly live organisms, but there is also some evidence that consuming it may support blood sugar control and aid digestion.



Miso is a fermented bean paste commonly used in Japanese cuisine, most familiarly in miso soup. To avoid destroying the beneficial bacteria with high temperatures, try stirring miso into dishes after turning off the heat, or using it in uncooked or lightly cooked preparations like sauces and dressings.

Kombucha is a fermented, slightly effervescent beverage made from black or green tea. It provides all the health benefits of tea, such as antioxidants and other phytochemicals, plus gut-healthy live bacteria. Kombucha is a great substitute for soda or other sweetened beverages, although it does contain some sugar so it should be consumed in moderation.

Check out the recipes on page 6 of this newsletter for miso dressing and Greek yogurt ranch dip to incorporate more fermented foods into your diet!

Spirituality Corner:

Creating a Sacred Space

by Erin Lubniewski, Occupational Therapist at Crestwood Treatment Center Fremont

Physical places or spaces can help support a connection to something bigger than ourselves and provide a protective buffer for our mental health. Environments we intentionally place ourselves in can help us find meaning, connection, and value.

The idea of a sacred space can be found across cultures and religious practices across human history. One example is an altar, which can be found in Roman, Greek, and Norse religions, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mexican culture, Santeria, and Neopaganism.

Altars can be “a table or place which serves as a center of worship or ritual,” (Merriam-Webster), or where offerings are made.

Similarly, shrines are sacred spaces dedicated to worshipping an honored figure (e.g., deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint, or figure of respect). They often contain pictures, figurines, or other associated objects. They can be found in homes and businesses.

Altars and shrines are some of the more common examples of sacred spaces, but there are many other types, including places in nature, forests, parks, park benches, beaches, cathedrals, temples, pilgrimage sites, burial sites, home, etc. We can find something sacred in just about any place or object, so the opportunities are seemingly endless to find something sacred to integrate into our spiritual practice and thus boost our mental health and well-being. What these places have in common is creating a space (physical or mental) that allows us to be present and encourages peace, contemplation, or ritual.



In addition to having a physical sacred place that we can go to, we can also create sacred spaces anywhere we go by bringing a spiritual anchor with us. This would be a small object that can be carried with you to access at any time to help remind and connect you to something personally meaningful. Spiritual anchors can include jewelry, tattoos, crystals, coins, etc. They can be combined with prayer, meditation, or ritual to bring peace and connection.



If having a sacred place or space as part of your spiritual practice resonates with you, there are several avenues to explore. Consider identifying a dedicated space in your home to add photos of loved ones, religious or spiritual images and objects, or mementos. Create a routine or ritual associated with contemplating in this space. Or, reflect on other physical locations that bring you special meaning, peace, or connection to a higher power. Then create intentional opportunities to spend quiet time in that location. Or, identify a small object that you can carry with you to help anchor you in any moment of need. Something that has special significance that increases feelings of connection, peace, or meaning.

Identifying and creating a sacred space or place can be incorporated into a spiritual practice to help regularly tap into the things that help increase feelings of meaning and purpose, which can in turn maximize our mental health and well-being.

Recipe: Greek Yogurt Ranch Dip

Making your own dip from scratch and skipping packet mixes allows you to control salt content and gives you flexibility with ingredients and flavor profiles. This basic recipe can be modified with other fresh or dried herbs, the addition of chopped onion or shallots, or even spiced up with some diced jalapenos or your favorite hot sauce.

Ingredients

1 cup plain Greek yogurt
 ½ tsp garlic powder
 ½ tsp onion powder
 1 tsp dried dill
 ½ tsp salt
 ½ tsp Worcestershire sauce
 Pinch of cayenne pepper (to taste)
 Fresh chopped chives or dill for garnish



Directions: Combine all ingredients (except for garnish) and stir well to combine. Keep chilled until service, then garnish with fresh chopped herbs.

Recipe: Miso Dressing

This dressing is great on salad, drizzled over grain bowls, or as a marinade for meats or grilled vegetables.

Directions: Combine all ingredients in a jar with a lid and shake vigorously until oil is emulsified. If dressing is too thick, add 1-2 tsp of water to thin.

***“I feel a recipe is only a theme,
 which an intelligent cook can play each
 time with a variation.”***

~ Madame Benoit

Ingredients

¼ cup white or yellow miso paste
 ⅜ cup apple cider vinegar
 ¼ cup canola or avocado oil
 2 tbsp toasted sesame oil
 2 tbsp honey or maple syrup
 2 tsp freshly grated ginger
 2 tsp freshly grated garlic

Any Health and Wellness News Questions?

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