

Power Foods for Midlife Bodies

By Cynthia Sass, RD

Nutritionists are homing in on the next superfoods: These 10 everyday edibles help protect your heart and bones, fight cancers, and take off pounds -- especially in combination.

Whole Grains, Soy Yogurt & Almonds



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Once you're 40, counting calories is key: Nearly every major chronic disease -- including heart disease and many forms of cancer -- is linked to weight gain," says nutritionist Christine Gerbstadt, MD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "But you also need to focus on optimal nutrition." One way to do that is to combine foods; experts believe that putting good-for-you foods together is even healthier than eating them solo. "We're learning more about food synergy, the idea that the whole meal is greater than the sum of its parts," says Dave Grotto, RD, author of *101 Foods That Could Save Your Life*. "The disease-fighting actions of one food may enhance nutrients in the other and vice versa." Add these 10 multitaskers to your shopping cart today.

1. Whole Grains

The high fiber and satiating properties of these foods (brown rice, kasha, dark bread, quinoa, whole-grain cereal) make them ideal for keeping your weight down. In fact, when Harvard researchers followed over 74,000 nurses ages 38 to 63 for 12 years, they found that those who ate more whole grains consistently weighed less than those who didn't. And women with the highest fiber intake were 50 percent less likely

to gain a major amount of weight in midlife. Studies have linked diets high in whole grains with a lower risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and colorectal cancer. Whole grains are digested slowly and steadily, and experts believe this helps control blood sugar, diabetes, and insulin levels. Because insulin may promote the growth of tumors, the thinking is that lower levels reduce the chance that colon cancer will develop. Whole grains also contain fiber, vitamin E, and plant sterols (substances that bind to cholesterol

in the digestive tract, which prevents them from being absorbed), all of which work to lower LDL, the "bad" cholesterol that clogs arteries. Finally, whole grains are rich in antioxidants and phytochemicals, which essentially act like bodyguards, protecting cells from free-radical damage that can trigger disease and signs of aging.

2. Blueberry Soy Yogurt

Recently, scientists at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, examined samples of both dairy and soy yogurts for properties that keep diabetes and hypertension in check, including enzymes that help control blood sugar levels. Of all the yogurts tested, blueberry soy yogurt packed the most punch. While blueberry got top honors, plain soy yogurt was also a standout, containing the highest levels of disease-fighting antioxidants. (Plain soy yogurt is also lower in added sugar, so toss some fresh blueberries into that serving of plain yogurt and enjoy a calorie savings.) What's more, one 6-ounce container can provide up to 30 percent of the recommended daily intake of bone-strengthening calcium. "The protein in yogurt also makes it satisfying, so you eat less overall," Gerbstadt says. Protein stays in your stomach longer and takes longer to digest, leaving you feeling fuller longer. Eating protein (versus the same amount of fat or carbohydrate) also produces a greater thermogenic effect, a transient jump in metabolism.

3. Almonds

Eating 1 ounce of these hunger-satisfying nuts provides you with about 12 percent of your daily recommended fiber intake. Scientists at the School of Public Health at Loma Linda University found that when people were asked to eat an additional 320 calories from almonds every day for six months, their average body weight increased by only three quarters of a pound. The researchers believe that the way that almonds were digested and absorbed by the body led to the study subjects eating less of other foods without realizing it. (If they had truly added 320 calories a day from foods other than almonds, they would have gained an average of 21 pounds.) Almonds are also extremely heart healthy: A recent study in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* of 41- to 54-year-olds found that when they consumed 20 percent of their total daily calories from plain, unsalted almonds for four weeks, their blood levels of the antioxidant vitamin E increased while their total cholesterol and triglycerides decreased. Not only that, but their LDL, or "bad," cholesterol levels dropped while their HDL, or "good," cholesterol levels rose.

Beans, Greens & Garlic

4. Black Beans

Eat three cups of black beans a week and you'll reduce your risk of heart disease and colon cancer. A review of the diets of more than 4,500 people ages 40 to 59 found that those who consumed the most vegetable protein had the lowest blood pressure. And research from the National Cancer Institute found that people over 35 who eat the most beans have the lowest risk of developing precancerous colorectal polyps. Beans are also a useful weight-management tool: One cup provides 12 grams of fiber, with just 180 calories and 14 grams of satiating, metabolism-boosting protein. Black beans are probably the most ubiquitous type -- available in many restaurants and delis -- but you can easily substitute your own favorite bean and get the weight-loss and disease-proofing benefits.

5. Mixed Green Salad

Salad offers weight watchers a satisfying twofer: It's high in fiber and big on volume, so you feel fuller longer. That explains why Pennsylvania State University researchers found that women consumed 12 percent fewer calories overall when they ate a large salad (three cups' worth) prior to having a pasta meal. "Salads that contain lettuce and other raw vegetables are an easy way to boost your intake of low-calorie, nutrient-rich vegetables," Gerbstadt says. "It's one of the most important dietary changes you can make over 40." Fitting in at least five servings of produce daily helps to maintain heart health, memory function, vision, and bone density.

6. Garlic

What *doesn't* it prevent? The March 2006 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition* devoted an entire section to 35 separate studies linking garlic to a reduction in cancer, Alzheimer's disease, high blood pressure, inflammation, and heart disease. And garlic packs just five calories per teaspoon.

Squash, Soybeans, Popcorn & Pepper

7. Yellow Squash

At just 30 calories per cup, most yellow squash is full of key nutrients for midlife women. It's high in vitamin A, which has been linked to improved immune function and a reduced risk of both skin and lung cancers. It's also full of lutein, a phytochemical believed to prevent age-related vision loss.

8. Edamame

A cup of whole unprocessed soybeans delivers eight grams of fiber (over 30 percent of the recommended daily intake) for just 240 calories. Edamame is also high in protein -- it has 20 grams per cup -- which makes it satisfying and a metabolism booster. It can also help you fight osteoporosis. A study done in China involving 200 postmenopausal women found that those who ate 80 milligrams of soy isoflavones per day (a little less than what you get in one cup of edamame) showed a significant increase in hipbone density.

9. Microwave Popcorn

Weighing in at 15 calories and one gram of fiber per cup, 94 percent fat-free (butterless) microwave popcorn is one of the best pound-paring foods around. Do the math: The typical 6-cup bag delivers nearly 25 percent of the recommended daily intake of fiber for about 200 calories or less. Popcorn is a whole grain, and corn has the highest level of antioxidants of any grain or vegetable.

10. Cayenne Pepper

A shake or two provides intense flavor but adds zero calories. Cayenne also contains capsaicin, which has been shown to boost calorie burning. All that heat is good for your heart too. A study of animals found that capsaicin prevented the oxidation of LDL cholesterol. Oxidation is the process that leads to hardening of the arteries and, eventually, heart disease.



4 Properties of Fat-Burning Foods

Each of our 10 disease-fighting foods also possesses at least one of four characteristics that affect body weight, says nutritionist Grotto. And just as combining foods may give you more nutrients, mixing ones with different slimming properties may give you more bang for your metabolic buck. Skinny foods have the following perks.

High in Fiber

Fiber is part of the total carbohydrate content of a food, but our bodies don't make enzymes capable of breaking it down. That means fiber is never digested or absorbed from the intestines into the bloodstream, so it can never be burned for fuel or stored as body fat. It simply travels through the digestive tract and is eliminated as waste. "Fiber provides fullness with no calories," Gerbstadt says. And it makes you feel fuller longer because it slows down the digestion and absorption of other types of carbohydrates. "This slower rise in blood sugar prevents your insulin level from spiking," Grotto says. "And since insulin is responsible for carrying carbohydrates into fat cells, moderating it can reduce your waistline." (Five grams of fiber per serving qualify as high fiber.) In addition to our picks, stock your pantry with dried figs (4.6 grams of fiber in two figs), split peas (eight grams of fiber in one-half cup) and kidney beans (4.5 grams of fiber in one-half cup).

Low Energy Density

In other words, a low number of calories for a reasonable portion size. "The quantity of a food has nothing to do with its calorie level," Grotto says. For example, one cup of romaine lettuce contains just 10 calories, whereas a cup of peanut butter has a whopping 1,600. Foods with a low energy density fill you up but don't contain loads of calories you need to worry about burning off. Try asparagus (60 calories in 9 ounces), fresh mushrooms (20 calories per cup) and fresh radishes (10 calories per cup).

Satiating

Research has found that protein is especially satisfying. That is, it keeps you fuller longer so the return of hunger is delayed. "This may be because protein stays in your stomach longer and takes longer to be digested, or it may have to do with the interaction between protein and sensors in the stomach and brain," Grotto says. Pick up nonfat ricotta cheese (16 grams of protein per one-half cup), vegetarian chili (8 grams per serving), and frozen lima beans (12 grams per cup).

Thermogenic

That's the term for a jump in metabolism caused by eating certain foods. Metabolism is based on the number of calories your body burns at rest, while digesting food and when physically active. Studies have found that certain food compounds can trigger a slight boost in metabolism for up to several hours after we eat them. Protein may be one. In fact, one study found that consuming 30 percent of calories from protein, versus 15 percent, resulted in a 3.9 percent increase in the number of total calories burned per day. Other thermogenic compounds include green tea extract and capsaicin, the natural chemical that gives a hot pepper its fiery taste. Add some heat with jalapenos, crushed red pepper, and chili pepper sauce.

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