

Antioxidants work best in their natural state

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Take a stroll down the aisles of your local grocery store and the word "antioxidant" pops out at you everywhere — teas, juices, chocolates, energy bars.

All bill themselves as providing large doses of these entities that, if you believe the hype, might do everything from cure cancer to make you 10 times smarter.

But what's the reality?

Nutritionists and dietitians say you shouldn't try to buy your antioxidants in a bottle or box.

Instead, you should embrace antioxidants in their natural state.

Get them fresh

Experts recommend that you head over to the produce aisle and stock up on the original antioxidant heavy hitters, which include fresh berries, spinach, red peppers and host of other fruits and vegetables.

Some teas, such as green, red and white, also can deliver powerful antioxidant punches.

Rather than worrying about swallowing a supplement each day or gobbling down that power bar with antioxidants, concentrate on getting those nine servings of fruits and vegetables that government guidelines recommend.

Even clocking in at the previous recommendation of five servings a day would likely suffice, experts say.

"We should be talking about fruits and vegetables," says Sara Blackburn, an associate professor of clinical nutrition at Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis' School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences.

Since most fruits and vegetables do not come with nutrition labels, think dark and deep for antioxidant-rich foods.

Scarlet pomegranates, magenta plums, forest-green broccoli, purple blackberries and even dark chocolate are all good bets.

Knock out villains

Our need to breathe creates our need for antioxidants. The oxygen we drag into our lungs creates byproducts known as free radicals that float through the body, looking for something with which they can react, says Jay Burgess, an associate professor of foods and nutrition at Purdue University.

These reactions often translate into trouble. When the free radicals bump up against our protein or DNA, they often have a detrimental effect.

"If they react with these molecules, they'll destroy their chemical characteristics and they'll lose the function they're supposed to have," Burgess says.

In the body, antioxidants have the potential to knock villains such as cancer, heart disease and other chronic illnesses off their feet.

Some enzymes also help out in the fight against reactive oxygen species, helping to repair the damage that they do, Burgess says.

Antioxidants donate electrons to these free radicals, derailing them from their potentially destructive course.

"We're recognizing that there is a benefit to eating things as close to the way God gave them as possible," says Jodi Smith, a nutritional consultant in Indianapolis. "The next level of understanding and studying these antioxidants will probably be to really look at what happens in the body."

