

Polyphenols Can Aid Gut Health, Boost Longevity

Written by Kristen Fischer | Published on December 12, 2013

New research on polyphenols shows they can help microorganisms in your digestive system, and may extend your lifespan, too. How can you get more of these antioxidants into your diet?



Antioxidants are the wonderful compounds that make some of our favorite foods good for us—dark chocolate and coffee, anyone?

Polyphenols, a type of antioxidant, have recently been in the spotlight as researchers uncover the health benefits of eating polyphenol-rich foods.

New [findings](#) from the New Zealand Institute for Plant & Food Research Ltd. show that polyphenols—which give color to fruits and vegetables and are also found in coffee, tea, nuts, and legumes—can break down into molecules that help beneficial microorganisms found in the digestive system. In short, they can support gut health, which is increasingly being recognized as vital to our overall well-being.

Another recent [study](#) published in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that large amounts of polyphenols can also boost your longevity. Researchers found that people who took in 650 mg per day experienced a 30% lower mortality rate than those who took in less than 500 mg per day. Dr. Luigi Ferrucci of the U.S. National Institute on Aging, who worked on the latter study, said scientists have long suspected that polyphenols have an effect on longevity. It was difficult to prove because many different foods contain small quantities of polyphenols and they are metabolized quickly.

Adding Polyphenols to Your Diet

“Increasing your consumption of fruits and vegetables is the best way to bolster your daily intake of these health-promoting compounds,” said Dr. Charlie Seltzer, a Philadelphia-based physician who specializes in anti-aging treatments.

He says the outer layers of many fruits and vegetables contain the highest concentrations of polyphenols, so don't peel off the skin before you eat them.

Another way to get more polyphenols from fruit is to consume them before they ripen, because polyphenol activity lessens as fruit ages. Another recent study has shown that [freeze-drying](#) fruit, as opposed to chilling it, preserves 80 percent of its antioxidants, including polyphenols. Drinking unsweetened green or black tea is also a great way to consume these compounds, as well as increase your daily fluid intake, Seltzer added.

While some dietary supplements contain polyphenols, the best way to get them is through whole foods. If that's not possible, “superfood” powders are the next-best option.

Dr. Britt Burton-Freeman, the director of Nutrition and Health Promoting Foods at the Illinois Institute for Technology, said that data supports getting polyphenols from actual food sources rather than pills. “Certain conditions may warrant polyphenol supplementation, but the science is still developing to support these uses,” she said.

The Best Sources of Polyphenols

The [European Journal of Clinical Nutrition](#) says that cloves, dried peppermint, and star anise are the seasonings with the highest concentrations of polyphenols.

Fruits with high levels of polyphenols include black chokeberries, black elderberries, strawberries, red raspberries, blueberries, plums, and black currants. Cocoa powder, dark chocolate, coffee, tea, and flaxseed meal are also high in polyphenols.

“As long as it doesn't cause weight gain or interfere with planned weight loss, you should strive to consume as much fruit and vegetables as possible while ensuring you're consuming adequate protein and healthy fat,” Seltzer said.