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WHAT TO EAT TO AVOID COVID-19

‘Food is more important than ever. We have to rethink what we eat. The time is now’

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We thought COVID-19 was only a respiratory virus, but with patients’ brains, hearts, kidneys, even toes being affected, we learned it was a vascular disease as well, damaging blood vessels and the circulatory system.

Wreaking havoc on endothelial cells, the vascular damage was seen not only in the lungs; the same damage was seen organ to organ, even after recovery, and not just from acute COVID-19.

Long-term effect

Apparently, those who recover end up with a significant long-term effect: persistent damage at the circulatory level, during and after the long tail of COVID-19.

Dr. William W. Li was one of the few scientists who asked early into the pandemic what happens to people after recovery: “We don’t know yet what long-term damage may occur and persist in the vascular endothelium. If it turns out that there is widespread systemic damage to the endothelial cells, then that can persist much longer than the actual infectious component of the virus.”

Li is the author of “Eat to Beat Disease: The New Science of How Your Body Can Heal Itself.” In this year’s Food Revolution Summit, host and author John Robbins asked Li, “A year later, is there anything we can do to protect and even repair our vascular systems? Is there anything we can do to protect our endothelial cells from breaking down in the first place?”

Li replied, “As a vascular biologist and an internal medicine doctor, before we talk about COVID-19, let’s talk about heart health. Because the no. 1 killer worldwide is cardiovascular disease, which is damage to the endothelium, and it doesn’t happen in short order like in COVID-19, but over many years. We’ve always thought of it as cholesterol buildup, but what is happening is the endothelial lining has been compromised. Blood doesn’t flow easily, so we get blood clots. So whether it’s a heart attack or a stroke, this idea of vascular protection has been paramount even before this pandemic took place.

“So what can we do? Not just to lower cholesterol or lipids, which are worthy goals, but we don’t just want to lower the bad guys; we also want to protect the good guys and get those endothelial cells and lining to be healthy,” explained Li.

Broccoli and kale

He recommended plantbased diets, comprised of fruits and vegetables that contain fiber and phytonutrients known to protect the endothelium.

These blood vessel- and cellstrength boosters include sulforaphanes in broccoli and kale, quercetin in apples and onions, and hydroxytyrosol from olive flesh [not olive oil].

Li and Robbins talked about a study where young, healthy people who got a flu shot were also given broccoli and broccoli sprouts. They experienced a 22-fold amplification of the flu vaccine, and had no evidence of the flu in them, showing that proper food combined with medicine is beneficial.

“Those with comorbidities are more likely to have bad outcomes if they get COVID-19, so food is more important than ever. We have to rethink what we eat. The time is now,” said Li.

Keeping an eye on food

“Food can boost our immune system, microbiome and stem cells, and protect our DNA. We have this opportunity to seize health by the scruff and make sure it stays with us in our own homes because the last place we want to be in a pandemic is a hospital,” Li said.

Added Robbins, “The lessons are not just for the pandemic but for all time. I’m optimistic that we are looking at a renaissance of food and health. We can love our food to love our health.”

“Everyone’s been focused on the progress of the vaccines, the usual pharmaceutical headline makers, but I’ve also been keeping an eye on food,” Li said.

He spoke about how, in July 2020, when everyone was so uncertain and panicked, somebody had the clear head to make an ingeniously designed study on 900 people in China in the spring of 2020. They were followed into the pandemic as it got worse. Who would get COVID-19? The scientists looked not just at their clinical outcomes but also at their blood, stool and microbiome, and they also did a food frequency questionnaire.

“Those who got COVID-19 had lower levels of interferon gamma, one of our body’s healthy cytokines and natural immune virus fighters. Those who didn’t get COVID-19 had elevated levels. From the poop, those who had more interferon gamma also had more lactobacillus and ruminococcus. Connecting to the food, the people who had the good bacteria and the natural virus fighters and didn’t get COVID-19 were drinking more tea, either green or black,” said Li.

Another study was done on the binding site on the cells where COVID-19 sticks its protein spike. While drugs can interfere with this, food can also help block this from sticking.

“A polysaccharide found in kelp, or kombu, that square piece of seaweed in miso soup, prevents COVID-19 from sticking to human cells,” he said.

Resisting diseases

To bolster immune response, Li also recommended pomegranate juice, blueberries, blackberries, black raspberry powder, mushrooms and cacao.

“Health is not just the absence of disease; it’s the result of your body’s health defenses that are hardwired since birth to resist disease. So every chance we have, three times a day we eat, eat food that activates those health defenses. It’s an opportunity to do something good for our health. Nature has laced many delicious plantbased foods with a variety of natural chemicals that activate your health defenses. If we can choose from this abundance, you will overall be able to resist diseases.”