- Alternative medicine

5 uncommon botanicals and functional foods

A guide to using modified functional foods for their health benefits

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Are you taking multivitamins, omega-3 fish oil, herbal supplements, and the like? These products fall under a broad group of natural health products commonly known as dietary or food supplements.

Marketing of food supplements, nutraceuticals, and other similar products has grown tremendously. This is primarily due to the increase in awareness of their advantages in preventive health. More people are also becoming inclined to adopt natural and alternative approaches due to the increasing cost of pharmaceuticals or medicines, as well as their negative side effects.

It is important to understand the differences among various dietary supplements. These products may belong under one group for legal and commercial purposes, but they were created differently for various purposes and health benefits.

Nutraceuticals are isolated bioactive compounds from food that provide medical and health benefits. Dietary supplements are concentrated, usually synthetic sources of nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, amino acids, enzymes, etc., that provide specific nutrients to correct deficiencies or bridge the nutrition gap when food intake is inadequate. Botanicals are plants or parts of plants, such as leaves, flowers, bark, roots, seeds, or fruits, that have functional health benefits. Examples are turmeric root, ginger root, ginkgo biloba, and aloe vera.

Functional foods are food or food ingredients that have additional health or physiological benefits beyond the normal nutritional values they provide like calories, carbohydrates, protein, and fat. Functional foods provide phytochemicals or plant nutrients, fiber, and antioxidants from plant food sources in wholesome form. When they are processed into liquid, freeze-dried, powdered, or pill form for convenience, they are known as modified functional foods.

Here are some uncommon botanicals and functional foods and their health benefits:

This mushroom contains polysaccharides (carbohydrates) that stimulate the immune system by increasing the production of natural killer cells to fight cancer cells and infections. It contains lectins that recognize and scavenge cancer cells. It also helps protect the kidneys and liver. Studies have shown that among post-kidney transplant patients, the phytonutrient cordycepin found in these mushrooms is associated with improvement in graft function, anemia, and leukopenia, and synergistically suppresses organ rejection by reducing drug-induced side effects.

This is different from Korean or Asian ginseng. American ginseng contains adaptogenic properties for stress, thereby enhancing sleep and promoting heart health. It helps with blood glucose regulation, immune regulation, and nerve regeneration. The phytonutrient ginsenosides also helps inhibit tumor formation.

It is very rich in nitric oxide, which helps with heart health by regulating blood pressure, cholesterol, and triglycerides. It enhances blood circulation and sleep quality. Hawthorn has protective properties for the kidneys by reducing oxidative stress.

Also known as prickly pear cactus, this plant has antioxidant activity that is seven times higher than the supplement vitamin C. It has 10,000 phytochemicals and antioxidants that increase the activity of the immune system's natural killer cells. This plant reduces oxidative damage to the kidneys and liver, provides relief from digestive problems by coating the intestinal and stomach lining, and aids with blood glucose regulation and collagen formation. Therefore, it enhances skin integrity and lubricates the joints.

The peel of the mangosteen has around 40 types of phytonutrients, xanthones. It acts as a natural antiallergy by preventing the production of histamine in mast cells (immune cells). The peel cannot be eaten raw; that is why it is processed and taken in powdered or pill form.

The bark and root of this shrub aid in regulating blood glucose, cholesterol, and triglycerides. It also has anti-inflammatory, antifungal, and antimicrobial properties. The phytochemicals in berberine trigger activated protein kinase, which improves the body's metabolism. This plant promotes liver and gut health.

When it comes to your health, don't take chances. Let a health professional take care of you. Consult a health professional before purchasing and consuming any health product.