

## Do you want to prevent getting sick?

### Uncommon functional food benefits for the body

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Functional food is a current trend that has been gaining popularity, especially post-pandemic. People are more health-conscious and want to prevent the development of diseases by boosting their immune defenses. What are functional food, and what do they contain that could not only prevent illnesses but also possibly reverse disease conditions?

Functional food is different from herbal medicines like dong quai, St. John's wort, etc., and dietary supplements such as ascorbic acid or vitamin C, ferrous sulfate or iron, and the like.

Herbal medicines are used to treat medical conditions just like Western drugs. On the other hand, isolated vitamins, minerals, amino acids, enzymes, essential fatty acids like omega-3, and isolated metabolites of antioxidants like resveratrol, glutathione, etc., are considered dietary supplements. They are meant to be taken only to correct nutrient imbalances when needed and must not be taken randomly because their concentration may cause imbalances of other nutrients. Isolated or chemically derived antioxidant supplements may also reduce the efficacy of certain medications, like chemotherapeutic drugs.

Given this issue, there is a need to obtain vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals, plant nutrients, and antioxidants from wholesome plant food sources. Unfortunately, many individuals do not consume at least two servings of fruits and three servings of vegetables on a daily basis. And we actually need more than that to increase our antioxidant levels in the body naturally. Furthermore, the ultra-processed food that people consume nowadays, from fast food, cured and canned meats, packaged snacks, sugary beverages, and baked treats, adds to the oxidative stress and free radical formation in the body. This compromises the immune system, leaving them prone to getting infections and developing diseases.

Functional foods can help in this aspect of providing health benefits from phytonutrient-rich wholesome (unprocessed, minimally processed, like freeze-drying or simple cooking methods) sources. Today, Japan has the most advanced functional food market in the world. In the 1980s, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare developed a distinct category of food with special health benefits known as functional food. These are foods that are composed of functional ingredients consumed to maintain or regulate gastrointestinal health and gut microbiome, blood glucose, blood cholesterol and triglyceride, blood pressure, immune response, and more.

All plant food sources are functional in nature because they contain phytochemicals and fiber. Some even have essential fatty acids like omega-3 found in psyllium, oats, and more. There are, however, specific plant sources that contain higher phytochemicals

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and specific ones that impact specific disease conditions and symptoms. Therefore, they can be included as part of a disease prevention strategy under the supervision of a registered nutrition dietician practicing integrative and functional nutrition.

Here are some uncommon functional foods and their health benefits:

#### Cordyceps Sinensis

This caterpillar-like mushroom or fungus is cultivated in the mountains of China and nearby places with high altitudes. Due to its rarity and very expensive cost, a cultivated form called Cordyceps Mycelium is

cultured from the Cordyceps Sinensis strain. Cordyceps contain carbohydrates in the form of polysaccharides. These aren't the carbs that will sabotage your weight loss journey. In fact, polysaccharides can help in controlling blood glucose levels by helping cleanse the kidneys of toxins. In addition to polysaccharides, cordyceps have bioactive compounds, known as cordycepin, that help in regulating immune cells. Studies have shown that Cordyceps Sinensis and mycelium can help decrease the incidence of infection, anemia, and leukopenia, or below normal white blood cells.

A systematic review of data obtained from randomized controlled trials and quasi-randomized controlled trials through the Cochrane Kidney and Transplant Specialized Register was conducted by Tao Hong and colleagues. Their study concluded that Cordyceps Sinensis was associated with some improvement in graft function (post kidney transplant), anemia, leukopenia, and liver function injury.

#### Damask Rose

The rose has many species or varieties. Unfortunately, you can't just eat the roses you received on Valentine's! The petals of the Damask Rose or Rosa Damascena, however, are edible and have astounding health benefits. The petals can be added to dishes or turned into tea and rose water. Extract of the flower can also be consumed because it can help lower blood glucose levels, especially after a meal, by blocking the action of the enzyme alpha-glucosidase. This enzyme breaks down glucose or sugar to be absorbed by the intestines, increasing blood glucose levels. Damask Rose is very high in vitamin C, but unlike vitamin C supplements, it isn't burdensome to the kidneys.

#### Oriental Raisintree or Hovenia Dulcis

This plant has been used as a hangover treatment. Phytochemicals found in Raisintree have protective properties for the liver. Therefore, it can also help lower cholesterol, which is synthesized or naturally produced by the liver.

#### Osmanthus

This flowering plant is beneficial for the lungs. It moistens the lungs and prevents the production of mucus or phlegm. Osmanthus has been used as an ingredient in many Chinese dishes and desserts. It is also consumed as tea. Studies have shown that inhalation of osmanthus fragrance can alleviate stress by regulating the production of the mood-balancing hormone serotonin. This hormone also controls appetite. Therefore, Osmanthus is an appetite suppressant. The next time you experience food cravings, try drinking some Osmanthus tea.

#### Opuntia or Prickly Pear Cactus

Opuntia can be eaten grilled or used as an ingredient in many dishes. If one wishes to get the optimum amount of 10,000 phytochemicals and antioxidants, Opuntia juice or freeze-dried forms are the best options. Opuntia has been shown to stimulate the immune system to form natural killer cells that fight off infection and cancer. It also contains amino acids that help repair the gut or intestinal lining, as well as promote collagen formation, which is good for skin health. It also has mucilage or a gel-like substance that helps alleviate hyperacidity and acid reflux.

Considering these functional foods as part of your preventive health strategy? Consult a functional nutritionist dietitian for proper assessment of your medical condition and guidance.