

Antioxidants and you!

Is an antioxidant some little animal that hides under your hedge, or is it a rather useful property of some of your favourite fruit and veg?

Actually it comes down to electrons in chemistry. There is a process called oxidation and an opposite process called reduction, which is about the number of electrons in hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Rust on iron is an example of this process. Oxidation in the body is just as destructive over time.

What concerns us about our health is that certain things cause free radicals (which are nasty, reactive atoms that do the oxidative damage) in our bodies. Cigarette smoking, a high alcohol intake, bad diet, trans and rancid fats, some toxins and all sorts of environmental factors can cause free radicals. If you have a lot of oxidation happening in your body, it can eventually contribute to the onset of various diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, dementia, arthritis and many others.

What can we do about it? Well, quite a lot, really. A lot of foods have antioxidant properties. Berries are one of the best sources, particularly the dark ones like blueberries, but all are pretty good. They contain lots of different types of antioxidants like proanthocyanidins and they make a great snack or supper just by themselves, and you can grow them in your backyard. Broccoli and the cabbage family are also great; they contain a different antioxidant from the berries. It's called indole-3-carbinol, which is helpful in avoiding reproductive system cancers like breast cancer. Tomatoes and other red coloured fruits like pink grapefruit contain lycopene which is good in cancer prevention. Red grapes contain resveratrol, and you might want to switch to red wine. But remember that while the resveratrol is good for you, other components of the wine may not be. All things in moderation!

Garlic is also good, as is spinach. Garlic contains lots of sulphur, which is responsible for the smell. If you're one of those who reek of garlic after eating it, that means that you're eliminating toxins from your body. You need more, even at the cost of a temporary friendship or two. As for spinach, it has lutein, which helps protect your eyes from macular degeneration.

Like a cup of tea? Green tea has catechins which are good antioxidants, but black tea also has some benefits. You can also chew on a carrot, as it has beta-carotene, a relative of Vitamin A. There are lots more foods, and also many supplements you can take which will help.

So, look out for those antioxidants, and remember to seek professional advice for any diet or health problem you might be worried about.

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[Advice in these columns is of a general nature only and is not to be taken as specific treatment.]