



“THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A *superfood*”

They’re thought to be packed with nutrients and minerals, but what exactly are “superfoods” and do they actually make us healthier? **Sheree Mutton** investigates.

BACK IN THE 1990s, “superfoods” was the buzz term given to a handful of foods said to be nutrient-dense and healthy additions to our diet. Today, it’s a name popping up on cafe menus and used by health gurus to describe the ingredients in many of their smoothies and salads. The appetite for these foods has grown significantly here in Australia, but so has their price and sceptics are critical of their true worth. So what are the real benefits of “superfoods”?

Accredited practising dietitian and Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) spokeswoman Tania Ferraretto, says one of the problems is the lack of regulation around the term “superfood”.

“There are no strict rules around what foods can be called ‘superfoods’, so this title may be used for marketing purposes by manufacturers or the advocates of particular foods,” she says.

“Often foods which are common and readily available are just as nutritious. For example, broccoli is just as healthy and cheaper than kale.” >



Tania says most “superfoods” are not doing you harm, but not doing you good either. “The problem comes when these foods are replacing healthier, less trendy foods in your diet, like wholegrains, dairy and unsaturated fats. This is why the DAA suggests aiming for a ‘super diet’ packed with a variety of nutritious foods, rather than relying on one food alone.”

Deakin University nutrition scientist Dr Tim Crowe agrees, saying there’s no such thing as a “superfood”.

“The label ‘superfood’ is an overused marketing tool that has no legal definition and certainly no meaning among nutrition scientists,” he says. “Rather than focus on the effect of a single nutrient or heavily marketed and hyped ‘superfood’, we should focus on the total effect of food on health.”

So how did the “superfood” movement gain traction in Australia?

Tania Ferraretto says it’s part of the overall interest in health. “While it is great that people are interested in healthy eating, they are often looking for a ‘magic bullet’ – one food or ingredient that will promote good health,” she says. “In reality, we need to focus on a variety of healthy foods – no one food will give you the nutrition you need.

“It has also provided an opportunity for companies to market their food products in a way that is not supported by evidence and, as a result, people are paying more than they need to for healthy food.” #

“SUPERFOODS” UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Chances are you’ve heard of kale, acai berries, quinoa, chia seeds, coconut oil and cacao, but what are their real benefits and are there alternatives? We asked nutritionist and dietitian Dr Joanna McMillan (right) to break down the facts on these so-called “superfoods”.



ACAI BERRIES

BENEFITS: “Acai do indeed have a very high Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity (ORAC) score, which is a measure of their antioxidant power – more than 10 times higher than blueberries,” says Dr McMillan. “Whether this translates into real health benefits is not yet known, but diets high in polyphenols – which deliver the gorgeous colour of berries – are associated with protection and lower risk of several diseases.”

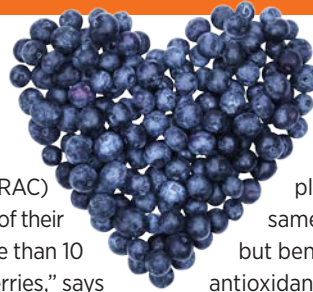
ALTERNATIVES: “Local fresh or frozen berries – raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, blueberries – all have various beneficial phytochemicals present and they taste awesome,” she says.

KALE BENEFITS: According to Dr McMillan, kale is packed with carotenoids. “Some of these can be converted to vitamin A so that a single cup of kale provides over 200 per cent of your recommended daily intake (RDI),” she says. “Two others, called lutein and zeaxanthin, play a particular role in eye health, reducing the risk of age-related macular degeneration and cataracts. You also get a whole whack of other nutrients, including vitamin C, B group vitamins and magnesium.”

ALTERNATIVES: Broccoli, cabbage and Brussels sprouts.

QUINOA BENEFITS: Pronounced “keen-wa”, this wholegrain is a favourite of Gwyneth Paltrow and has double the protein of rice. “It’s low GI and high in fibre with 75 per cent more than brown rice,” says Dr McMillan. “Plus it’s rich in B group vitamins, including folate. It’s also gluten free for those who need to avoid gluten.”

ALTERNATIVES: Millet and amaranth.



CHIA SEEDS

BENEFITS: Dr McMillan says they’re rich in both soluble and insoluble fibre, plant omega-3 fats (not the same as long chain omega-3s, but beneficial none the less), antioxidants and plant protein, with all the essential amino acids present.

ALTERNATIVES: “Flaxseed [also called linseed] is probably the closest seed, also being rich in plant omega-3s,” she says.

COCONUT OIL BENEFITS: Once dismissed by most people because of its high saturated fat content, coconut oil is now widely used as a substitute for butter. Yet the Dietitians Association of Australia says the current evidence shows that coconut oil does not stack up against healthy unsaturated fats (such as those found in olive oil). “The many benefits stated in the media are unsubstantiated and often downright wrong,” says Dr McMillan. “Coconut oil is not rich in medium- chain triglycerides, for example – the principal fat is lauric acid, a long chain saturated fat. Claims that you burn coconut oil more readily are nonsense.”

ALTERNATIVES: “Extra virgin olive oil is head and shoulders above coconut oil and well substantiated by research,” says Dr McMillan. “It’s rich in antioxidants, other beneficial phytochemicals and provides vitamin E – none of which are present in coconut oil.”

CACAO BENEFITS: “Rich in polyphenolic antioxidants and may help to reduce blood pressure, improve blood vessel health and improve blood cholesterol profiles,” says Dr McMillan.

ALTERNATIVES: “Pure cocoa powder without added sweeteners is the same thing [as cacao],” she says.

“Look for raw cocoa powder for the highest antioxidant content, as some are lost in the processing to make regular cocoa powder.”

