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## **From A to Z Antioxidants Are Our Best Bet for Health.....and Youth**

*Marie Bouvier-Newman*

The cycle of life is defined by three activities; creation (new life), maintenance (upkeep), and destruction (breaking down or death). A seed germinates and becomes a plant that eventually flowers creating more seeds. It eventually dies and returns to the soil in order to sustain new seeds. In our bodies, a similar process of creation, maintenance and destruction occurs. Our intention is to expand the period of maintenance and slow the process of destruction thereby living healthfully to a ripe old age.

This cycle often occurs simultaneously creating the need for balance between the three activities, a tricky proposition. For instance, oxygen is a maintenance element but is also involved in an activity called oxidation, a process that breaks down organic materials. Although we will quickly die without oxygen, the process of oxidation occurs in our bodies as a result of normal metabolic functions as well as exposure to solar and nuclear radiation and other environmental pollutants. The rate of oxidation, also known as free radical activity, has therefore been implicated in how fast we age and in degenerative diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and other kinds of damage to the body.

Substances called antioxidants obtained from whole foods protect us from the effects of oxidation. Let's go to our kitchens for a better look at how this works. Slice an apple and leave it on the counter for a short time and notice that it quickly turns brown – oxidation at work. Slice another and rub it with a little lemon juice and notice that it takes longer to turn brown – antioxidant activity in motion. Vitamin C, an antioxidant vitamin in lemon juice slows the oxidation process by protecting the apple from free radical attack, slowing the process of destruction or decomposition.

Similarly, antioxidant activity is our defense against free radical damage making the inclusion of antioxidant-rich foods into our diets a high priority. Antioxidants are prevalent in fruits and vegetables. Along with some common sense about exposure to unhealthy elements, high antioxidant intake slows the destruction cycle so we may age more gracefully. Forget facelifts. Forget age-defying creams. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, five to ten every day, will help maintain our youthful appearance and good health.

So what are the antioxidant elements and what are the best sources? Vitamin A (as the carotenoids), vitamin C, vitamin E, and to some degree, the minerals selenium and zinc, form the foundation of our antioxidant defense system.

Vitamin A or more accurately, the full range of carotenoids, the precursors of vitamin A is a very important antioxidant. Consuming foods rich in carotenoids reduce the risk of lung, colon, bladder, cervical, breast, and skin cancer, protect our eyes against cataracts and macular degeneration, enhance communication between cells, and show great promise in their ability to protect us against heart disease. Best choices include brightly

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colored foods such as butternut squash, carrots, collards, orange bell peppers, spinach, and sweet potatoes.

Vitamin C speeds the production of new cells in wound healing and is essential for the development and maintenance of connective tissue in the body (muscle, cartilage, tendons, etc.), slows the development of cataracts, helps fight off infection, reduces the severity of allergic reactions, has anti-inflammatory properties, is involved in the synthesis of hormones and other chemicals, and makes calcium more absorbable. Vitamin C is found in citrus fruits, strawberries, broccoli, green and red bell peppers, and tomatoes. Flavonoids, an important element in vitamin C foods because of a chemical called resveratrol, can be found in grapes, peanuts, and tea (white and green tea especially).

Vitamin E helps maintain a healthy reproductive system, nerves, and muscles and may be helpful in heart health. Vitamin E comes from tocopherols and tocotrienols, two families of naturally-occurring chemicals in vegetable oils, nuts, and seeds, and to some degree whole grains and green leafy vegetables. Tocopherols have anticoagulant characteristics (reduce blood clotting) and may even lower cholesterol by keeping low-density lipoproteins (LDL -the bad cholesterol) from accumulating on artery walls.

The mineral selenium and vitamin E work together to protect the heart. Selenium itself has been shown to reduce lung, prostate, colon, and rectal cancer. Food sources include wheat germ, nuts, molasses, Swiss chard, Brazil nuts; garlic, onions, tomatoes, radishes, whole grains, and brown rice.

Zinc is involved in growth and cell division. It protects nerve and brain tissue, bolsters the immune system, is involved in food metabolism, and is very important to prostate health. Good sources include dairy products, beans and lentils, yeast, nuts, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, oysters, eggs, and whole grain cereals.

We cannot underestimate the value of antioxidants with all of the things we are exposed to every day. So consider being screened to learn your current antioxidant level then take action through an improved diet and possibly antioxidant supplementation to maximize antioxidant activity and reap the benefits for many years to come.

*BIO:*

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