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These little mini trees are notorious for being pushed off the plates of kids around the world, but broccoli's reputation as one of the healthiest veggies still rings true. Broccoli belongs to the cruciferous vegetable family, which includes kale, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, bok choy, cabbage, collard greens, rutabaga and turnips. These nutrition powerhouses supply loads of nutrients for little calories. If you are trying to eat healthier, cruciferous vegetables like broccoli should be at the very top of your grocery list.

Health Benefits

Fighting cancer:

Eating a high amount of cruciferous vegetables has been associated with a lower risk of cancer; namely lung and colon cancer. Studies have suggested that sulforaphane, the sulfur-containing compound that gives cruciferous vegetables their bitter bite, is also what gives them their cancer-fighting power.

Researchers have found that sulforaphane can inhibit the enzyme histone deacetylase (HDAC), known to be involved in the progression of cancer cells. The ability to stop HDAC enzymes could make sulforaphane-containing foods a potentially powerful part of cancer treatment in the future. Sulforaphane is now being studied for its ability to delay or impede cancer with promising results shown in melanoma, esophageal, prostate and pancreatic cancers.

Other easily recognized cruciferous vegetables include cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, turnips and cabbage, as well as the lesser-known arugula, broccolini, daikon, kohlrabi and watercress.



Healthy Foods

Health Benefits: Broccoli

Another important vitamin that broccoli contains, folate, has been shown to decrease the risk of breast cancer in women. Adequate intake of dietary folate (in food) has also shown promise in protecting against colon, stomach, pancreatic and cervical cancers. Although the mechanism of protection is currently unknown, researchers believe that folate's protective effects have something to do with its role in DNA and RNA production and the prevention of unwanted mutations. There is no evidence that folate in supplement form provides the same anti-cancer benefits.

Improving bone health:

Poor vitamin K intake is linked with a high risk of bone fracture. Just one cup of chopped broccoli provides 92 micrograms of vitamin K, well over 100% of your daily need. Consuming an adequate amount of vitamin K daily, improves bone health by improving calcium absorption and reducing urinary excretion of calcium. Broccoli also contributes to your daily need for calcium, providing 43 milligrams in one cup.

Looking younger:

The antioxidant vitamin C, when eaten in its natural form (in fresh produce as opposed to supplement form) can help to fight skin damage caused by the sun and pollution, reduce wrinkles and improve overall skin texture. Many people automatically think of citrus fruit when they think of vitamin C, but did you know that broccoli provides 81 milligrams in just one cup? That is more than what you need in an entire day. Vitamin C plays a vital role in the formation of collagen, the main support system of the skin. Vitamin A and vitamin E are also crucial for healthy looking skin, both of which broccoli provides.

Improved digestion and natural detoxification:

Eating foods with a natural fiber like broccoli can prevent constipation, maintain a healthy digestive tract and lower the risk of colon cancer. Adequate fiber promotes regularity, which is crucial for the daily excretion of toxins through the bile and stool. Recent studies have shown that dietary fiber may also play a role in regulating the immune system and inflammation.

Protection from chronic disease:

According to the Department of Internal Medicine and Nutritional Sciences Program of the University of Kentucky, high fiber intakes are associated with significantly lower risks of developing coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and certain gastrointestinal diseases. Increased fiber intake has also been shown to lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, improve insulin sensitivity, and enhance weight loss for obese individuals.