

Let Food Be Your Medicine: Eat Your Greens!

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One of the loneliest parts of the produce section is the area where they pile up the greens---kale, spinach, chard, mustard greens, turnip greens and the like. Not that many people know how to cook them, and fewer actually know why they should. However, these humble and inexpensive foods pack an enormous amount of vital nutrients into just a few calories, and should be a regular part of everyone's diets.

Kale is in the same family as broccoli and cabbage, and shares many of the same health benefits. The organosulfur compounds found in kale act as anticancer agents by activating detoxifying enzymes in the liver that neutralize potential carcinogens. They have specifically been shown to stop the growth of breast cancer cells. Kale also protects against cataracts, due to lutein's ability to protect against damage from uv light. Vitamin A is also very abundant in kale; it has been shown to help prevent emphysema from smoking or being around second hand smoke. Kale also has a large amount of Vitamin C -- 88% of the Daily Value in 1 cup cooked kale. One of Vitamin C's jobs is to help remove free radicals, which can damage cells and lead to cancer. Also, free radicals oxidize cholesterol, which allows it to then stick to the walls of arteries; kale therefore helps to prevent plaque formation. Kale, like most cooked greens, is also a better source of calcium than dairy products, especially in light of the calorie difference between the two.

Chard is another leafy green and is a member of the beet and spinach family. The Vitamin K found in chard is helpful in osteoporosis prevention and treatment, since it activates osteocalcin, which is needed to anchor calcium into bone. Without adequate osteocalcin, supplemental calcium cannot be adequately used. Chard is also helpful to prevent cataracts and emphysema, as it has an even higher content of lutein than kale (1 cup cooked chard has 109.9% of DV). The magnesium content of chard is also high and helps to regulate nerve and muscle function. Adequate magnesium helps protect against spasm of muscles in the heart and lungs and leads to less muscle fatigue and fewer migraines.

Spinach is best known of all the cooking greens and contains a huge amount of Vitamin K (1 cup raw = 200% DV, 1 cup cooked = >1000% DV). In addition to its heart protection and anticancer activity, spinach has been shown to protect against severe brain damage that can occur after a stroke. The ischemia and then reperfusion of blood into the brain after a stroke causes a large output of free radicals, which then cause excessive cell damage. The antioxidant capacity of spinach, eaten prior to the stroke, cut this damage in half. Although some people who are taking blood thinning medication may be concerned about eating foods high in vitamin K, it is still safe as long as you are consistent in your intake and eat it regularly.

Many quick, easy recipes are available for cooked greens---the easiest is to saute onions and garlic in olive oil, then add the cleaned greens. Saute for a short time til wilted. Especially for the kale, adding a small amount of water or stock to the pan and covering for a few minutes will ensure tender greens that have retained their nutrients and great taste....and healing properties!