

Healthy Eating

What really are antioxidants?

Antioxidants play an important role in overall health. They are natural compounds found in some foods that help neutralize free radicals in our bodies.

Free radicals are substances that occur naturally in our bodies but attack the fats, protein, and the DNA in our cells, which can cause different types of diseases and accelerate the aging process, according to Claudia Fajardo-Lira, professor of food science and nutrition at California State University–Northridge.

The best antioxidant sources are fruits and vegetables, as well as products derived from plants. Some good choices include blueberries, raspberries, apples, broccoli, cabbage, spinach, eggplant, and legumes like red kidney beans or black beans.

They're also found in green tea, black tea, red wine, and dark chocolate. Usually, the presence of color indicates there is a specific antioxidant in that food.

The keyword here is variety. Try to get as many fruits and vegetables with different colors when you plan your meals and go to the grocery store. An array of color in your diet will give you the widest range of helpful antioxidants.

Antioxidants added to foods are as effective as those that occur naturally. Vitamins such as C, A, and E can be added to foods—and they often are, such as in orange juice.

It's important not to overdo it on vitamin supplements because there can be too much of a good thing. With food alone, it would be extremely difficult to consume too many antioxidants.

The MyPlate tool based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that you make half your plate fruits and vegetables. If you aim to do that at most meals, you can be sure to get the antioxidants you need, recommends the Institute of Food Technologists.

