

Which superfoods should you eat?

Hands up who has eaten kale this week? Blueberries? Chia seeds? All under the understanding that they're 'superfoods' so they must be doing us some good? The term superfood has become a staple in our vocabulary; it refers to those foods that've been identified as being extremely high in a particular nutrient, which is thought to have a positive benefit to our health and/or performance. Celebrity endorsements and media claims have led us to believe that such an item exists; so is it all just hype or is there some truth to the claims?

So from that perspective, a superfood cannot exist – no individual food item is really able to provide all the components you need for a healthy diet. Additionally, I feel this whole drive towards superfoods provides false hope – eating a punnet of blueberries can't offset that burger you chose to have at lunchtime. Similarly eating goji berries every morning doesn't transfer to a better run performance if you haven't put the training in.

That said, I do believe that individuals should aim to eat a 'super diet' high in foods that, when combined, will provide a diet rich in nutrients and optimise good health. Meaning that cheeky burger no longer needs to be a guilty secret and those goji berries, when combined with the correct training schedule and consumed at the right time, may contribute towards a better run performance.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

No matter we working with – from elite, recreational to non-athletes – the key is to help them tailor their nutritional intake to their training, lifestyle, family commitments and budget (many of the superfoods on the market are costly; you need to eat an awful lot of kale to get the rich nutritional value that's often quoted.)

And sticking with kale, did you know that 100g gives you 1.5mg of iron, the same amount you get from two eggs? More importantly, the bioavailability of iron is much higher in eggs, the body can absorb and utilise it more efficiently. This is just one example; for every 'superfood' there's a cheaper alternative option that provides equal amounts of the 'super' nutrient.

While chia seeds are often branded the 'King of Seeds', did you know that linseeds and flaxseeds are nutritionally equal, and at a lower cost. Similarly goji berries have been promoted due to their high levels of antioxidants, particularly vitamin C. But a 30g serving of dried goji berries has the same amount of vitamin C as six whole strawberries.

PERFORMANCE BENEFITS

So what about when it comes to athletic performance? There are a few foods that have been studied extensively and, while I still wouldn't advocate superfood status, they do seem to be backed up by sufficient evidence to be included as part of your performance diet.

In recent years there's been much hype about the use of beetroot as a performance aid. This came about as studies demonstrated that the high nitrate content of the beetroot encouraged oxygen uptake by up to 16%, having a marked improvement on performance, as we know that it's the lack of oxygen to our working muscles that causes the increase in acidity, preventing us from maintaining a high speed.

Practically, studies have since confirmed positive results when 5mmol of nitrate are consumed daily 1-3 hours before training, five days leading up to a competition for any event that lasts between 3-36mins. The jury is out, though, about whether this effect is limited to those new to sports rather than veteran and elite athletes. The other major problem is that the nitrate value of beetroots differs and it's very hard to determine how much beetroot you'd need to eat to get this effect. Beetroot shots and juice have been developed with this in mind... but they're an acquired taste!

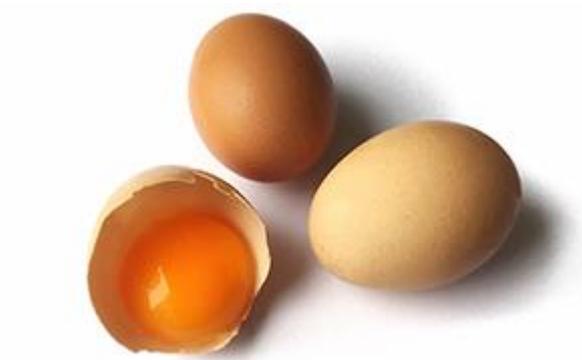
GET MILK!

It's been well-documented that milk is the ideal choice for recovery from high-intensity exercise. When you look at the recommendations for recovery in terms of carbohydrate and protein, the suggested amount is a 3:1 ratio of carb:protein. This ratio ensures replenishment, particularly after high-intensity exercise, training or competition when glycogen stores will be completely or close to depleted. This is further enhanced if carbohydrate is in a fast-release form and protein is easily digestible. The milk sugar, lactose and whey protein in milk provides this balance, thus making it a perfect recovery choice. Milk is also a good source of minerals and electrolytes, making it ideal for rehydration.

Tart cherries are also receiving a lot of attention in the performance nutrition world – again there seems to be sufficient evidence to suggest that the high levels of anthocyanins, powerful antioxidants, have the ability to reduce inflammation and oxidative damage after high-intensity training.

HERO FOODS FOR TRIATHLETES

They're not in the superfood camp, but here four affordable alternatives...



Eggs

Two medium eggs provide around 15g of protein, 100% of your RDA of vitamin B12, plus selenium, a powerful antioxidant.



Greek Yoghurt

Most varieties provide 10g of protein/100g, which is double the amount found in standard yoghurts.



Oats

Porridge is low in fat, high in soluble fibre and also a great source of complex carbs, which release energy slowly throughout the day.



Sweet Potato

Sweet potatoes have a high beta-carotene antioxidant content and are a great source of complex carbohydrates.