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BALANCED CHOICES
for a healthy lifestyle

Out of the Closet and Into the Nutrition Limelight:

Super Star Fruits and Vegetables You May Be Missing

A bounty of flavor and nutrition await at your local green grocer, farmer's market, supermarket or health food store! If apples, bananas and potatoes are the typical produce fare in your shopping basket, it's time to expand your horizons and treat your tastebuds to some new, and some not-so-new fruits and vegetables. Meeting your daily goal of nine servings of fruits and vegetables each day becomes a lot easier when you add some new flavors and variety. The fruits and vegetables featured below contain appreciable amounts of one or more antioxidant nutrients, phytochemicals or both.

Acai. The small dark purple acai berry (pronounced ah-sigh-ee) is grown in the Brazilian rainforest. It has a rich berry flavor with a hint of chocolate. Loaded with antioxidant phytochemicals, acai berries are also an excellent source of vitamin C and contain amino acids, omega fatty acids and calcium. The berries cannot be purchased whole, though processed forms of the fruit are gaining popularity in the United States. **Eating tips:** Look for acai in health food stores or health food supermarkets in juice, juice drinks, smoothies or extracts. Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats sell frozen puree which can be used to make smoothies, drinks and desserts.

Artichoke. Though considered a vegetable, the artichoke is the edible bud of a thistle plant. Artichokes provide an array of nutrients, including vitamin C, fiber, magnesium and the B vitamin folate. A recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture named artichokes as one of the top antioxidant-containing vegetables. Artichoke extract has demonstrated a strong antioxidant effect in laboratory animals. Steamed or boiled artichokes are low in calories. However, artichoke hearts marinated in oil and sold in a jar contain considerably more calories. To prepare: cut off the base and top. Trim the tips of the petals. Plunge into water with one tablespoon vinegar or lemon juice per quart to preserve color. Boil in three inches of water in a covered stainless-steel or glass pot (iron or aluminum will turn artichokes black or blue) until a petal near the center pulls out easily—about 25 to 40 minutes. Drain well. **Eating tips:** Pull the outer petals off one at a time and dip into sauce or dressing. Put the base of the petal in your mouth and pull it through your teeth to scrape off the "meat." When you get to the center or "heart" of the artichoke, be sure to scrape away the inedible crown of fuzz known as the "choke." Cut the heart with a knife and fork and enjoy.

Cranberry. Cranberries, like their botanical cousins, blueberries, are among the richest sources of proanthocyanidins (PACs), important antioxidants famous for their role in preventing *E. coli* bacteria from adhering to the bladder wall and multiplying. One cup of whole berries is loaded with vitamin C and a generous four grams of fiber, most of which is pectin, a cholesterol-lowering soluble fiber. One-half cup of dried cranberries provides about the same amount of fiber as one cup of fresh, though most of the vitamin C is lost in the processing. Read labels as some brands may add back vitamin C. Besides their role in promoting urinary tract health, new research suggests that cranberries' bacteria-blocking role may help protect other parts of the body as well. PACs may help thwart peptic ulcers by preventing *H. pylori* – the bacteria responsible for causing most stomach ulcers – from adhering to stomach lining.

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Cranberry toothpaste or mouthwash may be on the horizon as effective oral health products, based on new research from the University of Rochester School of Dentistry where researchers found that beverages containing 25% cranberry juice prevented *S. mutans*, a strain of acid-producing strep bacteria from sticking to the surface of an artificial tooth. **Eating tips:** Chopped cranberries can add flavor and fiber to quick breads, muffins and cookie recipes. Dried cranberries make a healthy portable snack. Steer away from cranberry juice cocktails, many of which contain high fructose corn syrup as a sweetener.

Fig. Inside the sweet, chewy flesh of figs you'll find a gold mine of nutrients, including polyphenol antioxidants. Figs provide four grams of fiber per serving (1 serving = about three Calimyrna or five Mission), more than most other fruits. Their tiny, crunchy seeds provide most of the fiber, which helps keep you regular. Figs also contain calcium, potassium, iron and the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin. **Eating Tips:** Fresh figs are available from June through September and are usually eaten raw; simply wash and remove the woody stem. Dip fresh figs into vanilla or lemon yogurt; the stem serves as a great handle. Dried figs, available year-round, make a healthful and portable snack. Add chopped dried figs into fruit salads or sprinkle on top of squash before baking. Chopped dried figs pair well with most any cooked grain like barley, couscous or brown rice.

Kumquat. An egg-shaped citrus-like fruit, kumquats can be eaten whole, skin and all. They are often sold with their dark green leaves attached and are most available during winter months in green grocers and Asian markets. Kumquats are a superior source of vitamin C. They also contain the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin. A single small fruit contains one gram of fiber. **Eating tips:** Kumquats can be eaten whole, sliced into fruit salads or used as an edible garnish.

Persimmon. Persimmons are a glossy orange-red skinned fruit originating from China. They are an excellent source of vitamin A, a good source of vitamin C, and rich in fiber. Persimmons come in two varieties: *hachiya*, the most common type, is identifiable by its acorn-like shape. The *hachiya* persimmon is tart until it becomes soft ripe. The *fuyu* persimmon, gaining popularity here as it is in Japan, is similar in color, but looks like a flattened tomato. The *fuyu* variety is smaller, sweeter, and is edible while still firm. **Eating tips:** Persimmons may be ripened at room temperature in a paper bag with an apple or banana. Once ripe, store in the refrigerator. Be sure to eat the fruit as soon as possible because overripe persimmons quickly turn mushy.

Pomegranate. Also known as Chinese apples, pomegranates are grown in California and come to markets already ripe between early September through December. Inside the glossy, leathery, yellow-orange to deep-red skin are over 800 kernels of translucent scarlet pulp, each wrapped around a small, hard, white seed. The kernels have a sweet-tart taste. One medium apple-sized pomegranate provides about 100 calories, plenty of potassium, some vitamin C and fiber. But the pomegranate's claim to fame is its stash of flavonoid antioxidants (the deep red color is a tip-off to the presence of anthocyanidins, in particular), which may confer heart and cancer protection. Commercial pomegranate juice—available in health food and specialty stores—has three times the antioxidant activity of either red wine or green tea. **Eating tips:** Pomegranate seeds can be enjoyed fresh with a squirt of lime juice. They add color, texture and flavor to salads, yogurt and hot or cold cereal. Pomegranate juice can substitute for citrus in sauces, vinaigrettes and beverages.

Rutabaga. Rutabagas are a large, rather unattractive purple and tan relative of the turnip. As a member of the cruciferous family, the rutabaga may help cut cancer risk. It is an excellent source of vitamin C, providing twice the amount in turnips and about the same level found in cabbage. In addition, the rutabaga is a good source of potassium, fiber and magnesium and contains a respectable amount of calcium for a vegetable. Rutabagas are rich sources of flavonoids like quercetin. Unlike its turnip and cabbage relatives, rutabaga has a surprisingly mild flavor and is versatile. **Eating Tips:** It can be eaten alone like a sweet potato—cut in wedges and baked with a touch of honey or brown sugar—or boiled, then mashed or pureed. Rutabaga strips can be stir-fried or roasted. Its sweet, mild flavor blends well with cloves, ginger and nutmeg. Rutabagas are usually sold with a coating of wax to prevent moisture loss. Peel this layer with a sharp paring knife before cooking.