

Nature's Pharmacy: Load Your Diet with Phytonutrients

What They Are

Phytonutrients are natural chemicals found in plants that protect their hosts from germs, fungi, bugs, disease, excessive sun and other threats in the natural environment. They are most plentiful in colorful fruits and vegetables, but they also can be found in whole grains, nuts, beans and tea.

When we eat foods full of phytonutrients, we benefit in myriad ways from their protective properties. They are antioxidant, support immunity, anti-viral, anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial. Phytonutrients help support cardiovascular and brain function and give the liver help with its detoxification duties. They also communicate with healthy genes to stimulate their function and facilitate cell repair.

As nutrition goes, phytonutrients are heavy hitters, cited in epidemiological research as being associated with reduced risk of many chronic diseases and potentially protective against certain types of cancer.

Where to Find Them

Phytonutrients can be found in most fruit and vegetables. Below, I have listed them by color since I often suggest it's best to "eat the rainbow" to get the most out of these chemicals in a flavorful array:

Red: Great sources of lycopene, which has been found to protect against prostate cancer as well as heart and lung disease. Lycopene is found in strawberries, cranberries, raspberries, tomatoes, cherries, apples, beets, watermelon, red grapes, red peppers and red onions.

Orange and yellow: Beta carotene supports intracellular communication and may help prevent heart disease. This can be found in carrots, sweet potatoes, yellow peppers, oranges, bananas, pineapple, tangerines, mango, pumpkin, apricots, winter squash (butternut, acorn), peaches, cantaloupe and corn.

Green: Phytonutrients, which are known to inhibit carcinogens, can be found in spinach, avocados, asparagus, artichokes, alfalfa sprouts, kiwi, collard greens, green tea and green herbs.

Cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale, arugula and bok choy are also extremely important because they have phytochemicals that are involved in detoxification.

Blue and purple: Chemicals that promote brain health may also help the heart by blocking the formation of blood clots. These chemicals can be found in blueberries, blackberries, elderberries, Concord grapes, raisins, eggplant, plums, figs, prunes and purple cabbage.

White and brown: Phytochemicals with multiple antioxidants and potential anti-tumor properties are found in onions, cauliflower, garlic, leeks, parsnips, daikon radish and mushrooms.

Bonus! Honey (preferably raw), chocolate and olive oil also contain a lot of phytochemicals. Chocolate even has one that is good for improving circulation!



Sharon Meyer, DipION CNC, is an integrative nutritionist with functional medicine training and more than 20 years of clinical experience. She specializes in weight management programs, dietary approaches to optimal health, targeted nutrition plans for specific conditions, goals and sensitivities.

Sharon has lectured around the world, from London to California, and has frequently been featured on television, radio and in print. Sharon is also a qualified Cordon Bleu cook. She practices in the Institute for Health & Healing clinics in San Francisco, Santa Rosa and can also be seen through video visits.

To learn more about the Institute for Health & Healing or request an appointment, visit myhealthandhealing.org.