



Berry Good for You!

Eating brightly colored berries isn't only fun and delicious – it improves cardiovascular and brain health, and also slows the aging process.

Numerous studies have shown that a high intake of fruits and vegetables reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, including high blood pressure, heart attacks, and strokes. Fruits and vegetables have many protective properties:

- They help lower blood pressure.
- They are high in dietary fiber.
- They are high in antioxidants which help prevent the oxidation of cholesterol in LDL particles which helps prevent atherosclerosis.



Some of the most important protective substances found in plant foods are polyphenols. Some foods high in polyphenols that have been studied and are protective to the cardiovascular system are cocoa (as in dark chocolate), red grape juice, wine, and tea.

Brightly colored berries are also being studied recently because they are particularly high in polyphenols and are also good sources of other key nutrients including vitamin C, folate, potassium, and soluble fiber.

The National Public Health Institute in Helsinki, Finland studied the affect of berries on cardiovascular health. The study design was a random controlled trial where half of the participants received 2 portions of berries daily, and the control group received a similar diet, but without berries. The berries used were brightly colored (blue, purple, and red) – strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, and a European “blueberry.” People ate 1 serving of berries and drank 1 serving of a berry juice daily for 8 weeks. The main outcome measurements were platelet function (platelets are involved in clots forming resulting in both heart attacks, and strokes), blood pressure, and HDL cholesterol levels.

After 8 weeks, researchers found that, compared to the control group, the berry eaters had:



- Favorable changes in platelet function
- Lower blood pressure (greatest improvement seen in those with high blood pressure)
- And improved blood HDL cholesterol levels (5% higher).

All of these changes are favorable for a healthier cardiovascular system and they occurred in just 8 weeks. The researchers concluded, “The results indicate that regular consumption of berries may play a role in the prevention of cardiovascular disease.”

At the recent International Conference on Vegetarian Nutrition at Loma Linda University, nutritional researchers presented evidence on the benefits on brain function of eating berries and other brightly colored fruits and vegetables. One study presented showed that persons with a high intake of berries along with other fruit and vegetables were 40% less likely to develop Alzheimer’s Disease.

Research on rats with advanced brain aging similar to Alzheimer’s disease showed marked brain function improvement when fed high intakes of berries for several weeks. They showed improved learning capacity (ability to solve a maze to find food which before berry feeding they could no longer solve) and evidence of new brain cell growth.



The researchers concluded that eating plant foods high in antioxidants, such as blueberries, blackberries, cranberry, Concord grape juice, strawberries, and walnuts, reduces oxidative stress that occurs in aging resulting in:

- Improved motor and cognitive behavior (brain function)
- Anti-inflammatory activity
- Enhanced neuronal communication related to memory and learning
- Neurogenesis (stimulating growth of new brain neurons)



They further concluded that eating berries, walnuts, and other highly colored fruits and vegetables may slow the aging process, provide a “longevity dividend,” and delay the onset of debilitating neurodegenerative disease.

Bottom line: If you want an easy way to improve your health, slow the aging process, improve brain function, and lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, eat more berries and other highly colored fruits and vegetables daily. They are low in calories, high in nutrients, good for your health, have no adverse side effects, and they taste delicious. Enjoy!

Sources:

1. Erlund I, Koli R, et al. Favorable effects of berry consumption on platelet function, blood pressure, and HDL cholesterol. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. 2008 Feb;87(2):323-331.

2. Joseph JA, et al. Role of antioxidants from berries and other sources in brain aging and diseases associated with aging, presented at the International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition, Loma Linda University. March 2008.

