

Superfood to the

Almost every week there's a new story in the national media about the amazing health powers of everyday food. We go behind the headlines to put superfoods to the test

Superfoods on parade

We asked our two families to eat the following foods in the amounts claimed to be beneficial. A 'portion' of fruit or vegetables is 80g.

■ **POMEGRANATE** A glass of juice, or one portion of fruit, a day

■ **DARK CHOCOLATE** (at least 70 per cent cocoa solids) 40g to 60g a day

■ **GREEN TEA** Two to four cups a day

■ **AVOCADO** One portion a day

■ **BROCCOLI** One portion a day

■ **NUTS AND SEEDS** A handful of walnuts, plus any other nuts or seeds you can manage, a day

■ **BLUEBERRIES** One portion a day

■ **BANANAS** One a day

■ **RED WINE** One glass a day (adults only!)

■ **OILY FISH** Two portions, each of 140g, a week

Pomegranates that can stop you dying, oily fish that can prevent teen violence and red wine that eases joint pain. These extraordinary claims have all been made in the national media, as part of the barrage of reports on 'superfoods' – foods so incredibly beneficial to our health that they deserve super hero status.

A balanced diet is at the centre of a healthy lifestyle, but the superfood concept goes a step further. Specific health benefits are attributed to individual foods, above and beyond their basic nutritional content.

How true these claims are is open to question, as is the ease of regularly eating superfoods in the amounts alleged to achieve health benefits.

To investigate, we set two families our superfood challenge: we asked them to consume ten super foods in prescribed amounts for a month. We also looked at some of the science behind the claims made about superfoods.

The superfood challenge

'I think I put weight on, or at least got fatter. I was eating things even when I wasn't hungry,' says *Which?* member Anna Friedenthal. But this wasn't after bingeing for weeks; it was after she had taken our superfood challenge.

Anna and Jon Friedenthal live in Chorlton, Manchester, with their children Ella (seven) and Sasha (three). Jon is an accountant and Anna is a part-time teacher. Anna does most of the shopping and cooking, and shops locally as much as possible.

The other family to take up our superfood challenge lives in Cheddar in Somerset. Alison and Steve Williams both work full time – Steve is a sales manager and Alison is a nurse-practitioner – while their two children Nadine (13) and Cara (11) are at school. Alison does most of the shopping and cooking and says they generally 'eat a pretty healthy diet'.

'I think I put weight on, or at least got fatter. I was eating things even when I wasn't hungry'

We picked ten superfoods (see left) and asked our families to eat them in the quantities claimed to have an impact on health. For example, we told the adults to drink one glass of red wine a day, which reportedly will improve the health of your heart and protect you against arthritis.

The families' reactions were mixed after a month of trying to eat this diet. Both had thought the challenge would be fairly straightforward as they already ate health-



Steve, Nadine, Alison and Cara Williams with just a few of the super

rescue?

ily, and there were some foods that both families enjoyed. They actually found it more difficult than anticipated. Shopping for the foods took more effort and, by the end of a month, the diet was becoming repetitive and a bit boring.

But Jon Friedenthal told us how the diet had 'certainly been more healthy in terms of snacks' and admitted it had made him feel 'virtuous'. And Stephen Williams told us how the pomegranate juice was a pleasant surprise: 'We'll certainly carry on buying it, as it's refreshing and tasty.'

Trying to eat more fruit and berries through drinking smoothies was a big hit with both families. Not surprisingly, though,

the children were less keen on some of the superfoods than the adults. Neither Nadine, Ella nor Sasha could be described as fans of avocado, while Cara had particular issues with broccoli. This led to some creative cooking in both homes – Alison told us how she liquidised broccoli and passed it off as herbs in spaghetti bolognese, while Anna mashed avocado with potato and tried unsuccessfully to pass it off as a new kind of green potato. Ella still refused to eat it.

Another issue was the time spent shopping. Eating more fresh berries and fruits meant more visits to the supermarket and higher shopping bills – Alison Williams estimates they were spending an extra



The Friedenthal family find that berries go down smoothly

£30 a week. The Friedenthals took to buying frozen blueberries to reduce the number of trips to the shops.

Ultimately, the families felt the challenge was fun but that it turned into a bit of a chore towards the end. Alison sums up: 'When I looked at the amount we had to eat, I thought it would be fairly easy. But it was quite a challenge – I spent more time shopping, more often, and it was difficult to get everyone to eat the foods. I'm glad it's over.' Anna Friedenthal agrees: 'We liked everything on the list, and the things we were eating were healthy, but there was no variety, especially in the colours. We got very bored towards the end. Overall, it was good, but not all the time.'

Anna tried to pass avocado off as a new kind of green potato. Ella still refused to eat it

What the experts say

Our families found it a struggle to keep the superfood diet up for a month, but what do the experts think of the concept?

Barbara Griggs and Michael Van Straten are the writers usually credited with inventing the term 'superfood' with the publication of their book *Superfoods* in 1990.

Michael Van Straten explains the basics of the concept: 'A superfood is one with functional properties over and above the basic nutritional minerals and vitamins. For example, celery as a food is nutritionally useless but it does contain phytochemicals that act as a diuretic. If you have water retention, it's a superfood that can help you ease the symptoms.'

But many experts are sceptical of the term. Tom Saunders, a professor of nutri-



foods that they had to eat for a month as part of our superfood challenge

'I don't think it's too bold to say that pomegranates stop you from dying'

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL FRANCIS, ALAIN LOCKYER, NICK WRIGHT

tion and dietetics at King's College, London, points out that the concept of food as medicine isn't new: 'One hundred years ago digestive biscuits were being marketed as being good for your digestion, while Coca-Cola was originally marketed as a tonic. There's probably some kind of basis to most of the claims but, when translated to the consumer, you're likely to see very little effect on your health.'

You can see Tom's point when you examine in detail some of the claims made about superfoods. For example, having been vilified in the 1980s for being the most calorific fruit, avocados have experienced something of a renaissance in recent years. This is in large measure due to the mono-unsaturated fat which accounts for most of their calories – most scientific evidence now suggests this kind of fat is good for you.

However, some of the other claimed benefits are more marginal. In April this year the *Daily Mirror* reported that avocados contain luteins, 'a substance that helps prevent age-related macular degeneration, a leading cause of blindness in the old'.

This claim is based on a study in which elderly people with cataracts were given 15mg tablets of lutein three times a week. The eyesight of those taking the lutein was less likely to deteriorate. But to get the equivalent amount of lutein from avocados, you'd have to eat 2.5kg of them a week.

NHS dietitian Cath Collins dismisses the superfood phenomenon. For Cath, the most important thing is the complete diet, not just individual foods within it: 'To rely on individual superfoods as nutritional talismans in your diet is just wrong. People want quick fixes, but for a truly healthy diet you need to eat a variety of vegetables and cereals, regularly, over a long period of time.'



Nadine Williams with an avocado

POMEGRANATES

'I don't think it is too bold a statement to say that pomegranates stop you from dying'

THE INDEPENDENT, 20 AUGUST 2005

Pomegranates, and their juice particularly, are the superfood *du jour*. To eat the actual fruit requires the patience of a saint, so juice drinks have been marketed as the answer to your pomegranate prayers. Sales of such drinks have gone through the roof in the past couple of years on the back of massive publicity about their 'goodness'. Pomegreat is the leading juice brand and it reports that, during 2005, its UK monthly sales went from 19,000 litres to an astonishing one million.

Pomegranates are high in vitamin C and polyphenols, which have antioxidant properties. Research suggests that the antioxidants can reduce your cholesterol levels and keep your circulatory system healthy. Many newspapers have reported that pomegranates may also ward off some cancers but the evidence for this is less conclusive.

Still, early studies suggest that small doses of 2oz of juice a day could be quite beneficial. Remember, though,



You would have to drink two cartons of juice a week to enjoy health benefits

that many pomegranate drinks are not pure juice. For example, Pomegreat is only 30 per cent juice (the rest is water) so you'd need to drink 9oz to get 3oz of benefit.

Pomegranate juice was a revelation for both our superfood challenge families.

Putting aside the perceived health benefits, both families loved the juice and it has replaced orange juice as their breakfast drink of choice.

They didn't enjoy eating the actual fruit, though, as Alison Williams told us: 'It's just too messy and way too much hassle.'

Cath feels the current emphasis on super ingredients is 'unhealthy', as it distorts our idea of what a healthy diet should be.

Michael Van Straten agrees: 'The biggest benefit comes from eating a wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables. I advise that if half of every meal you eat has been grown, apart from potatoes, you're not going to go far wrong.'

But when challenged that the term 'superfood' could be unhelpful, he says: 'The point of identifying superfoods is to point people towards better choices. If you

'To rely on individual superfoods as nutritional talismans in your diet is just wrong'

OILY FISH

Diet of fish 'can prevent' teen violence

THE OBSERVER, 14 SEPTEMBER 2003

Headlines claiming that the high levels of omega oils in oily fish can save your children from a life of crime took the hype surrounding superfood to another level. Between 12 and 18 June this year, for example, stories about oily fish appeared 18 times in the national press.

Coverage has been prompted by research in Mauritius, in which a group of three-year-olds was fed an enriched diet which included oily fish. Two decades later it was found that the group was 64 per cent less likely than a control group to have a criminal record. What the headlines failed to



Cath Collins dismisses superfoods

can sprinkle some fruit in your cereal, I'd say you'd get more benefit to your health if you sprinkle blueberries rather than raisins.'

On the face of it, recommending that someone eats blueberries rather than raisins is fairly harmless. And yet it's a debate that inflames passions, probably because of the way superfoods are being marketed. The growth in sales of the pomegranate juice drink Pomegreat over the last year is a case in point (see left).

Tom Saunders claims most of the hype about superfoods is driven by 'clever marketing men' who are trying to 'add value' to their products with health claims. He also claims he could sell any vegetable as a superfood, simply by identifying a particular nutrient and some research associated with it. 'You could do something around the aspartame in asparagus if you wanted,' he said.

The national papers love stories about superfoods – for example, there were just 12 mentions of pomegranates in April



Our superfood challenge families ate 280g a week

mention, however, was that they were also given exercise and education.

There is a growing body of opinion that the essential fatty acids found in fish such as mackerel and sardines offer health benefits which could reduce the risk of heart disease and improve children's brain power and concentration. But the *British Medical Journal* published a report in March claiming the evidence is 'unclear'.

Oily fish contains pollutants that can build up in our bodies. The official advice



Anna Friedenthal rustles up some healthy seared salmon for her family

is to limit the amount we eat – women and girls can eat two portions a week, while men and boys can eat four.

Despite these concerns, the positive publicity has clearly had an impact on sales: we ate 13 per cent more mackerel in 2005 than in 2004.

2002 but that leapt to 56 mentions in April 2006 – and enthusiastically trumpet the latest scientific research.

This is a problem for Michael Van Strat-en, who says: 'The media wants easy labels. Run-of-the-mill reporting is very unrepresentative of what's in the science.'

Eating superfoods as part of a balanced diet isn't going to do your health any harm. But all the experts we spoke to agreed that if you're not eating a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables, just eating one or two of the superfoods is pointless.

RED WINE

Now red wine can ease your sore joints

DAILY MAIL, 29 NOVEMBER 2005

Red wine contains high levels of antioxidants, which help prevent harmful elements attacking healthy cells. In particular, it contains resveratrol, which has been shown to thin the blood and which may cut the effects of cholesterol.

But some newspaper headlines are taking it too far. 'Red wine can ease your sore joints' is very misleading. As the article notes, the research was conducted only on patients with osteoarthritis and the treatment suggested would be a drug made from red wine, not the drink itself.



Steve and Alison Williams enjoy a glass

The benefits of drinking red wine should also be weighed against the risks of drinking too much alcohol. Women shouldn't drink more than two to three units a day, and men three to four.

Nevertheless, red wine does appear to be more fashionable nowadays as there is a noticeable trend towards it away from white wine. This is probably partly down to the

The final word on our month-long superfood challenge goes to Jon Friedenthal. He told us: 'It wasn't a great success and I've really missed colourful foods. But I will make some small changes to my routine as a result of having taken part in the *Which?* challenge.

'My hot drinks will now be a little greener and, instead of having a beer and a packet of crisps, I now look forward to a glass of red wine, some dark chocolate and some pistachios – luxury!'

'The media wants easy labels. Lots of the reporting doesn't represent what's in the science'

perceived health benefits and press coverage.

The adults on our superfood challenge were looking forward to doing their duty to *Which?* by drinking

red wine daily. So they were surprised when it turned into a bit of a chore.

Jon Friedenthal told us how it was tempting to have more than one glass: 'I had to remember it was one small glass a day, not one large one!'

DARK CHOCOLATE



Sasha and Ella Friedenthal tuck in

Chocolate's dark secret – it's good for your heart

DAILY TELEGRAPH, 20 DECEMBER 2005

Newsflash: no it isn't. Chocolate has a lot of sugar and saturated fats, which can make you gain weight.

The 'good' ingredients in dark chocolate are flavanols – antioxidants found in high levels in cocoa beans – hence the notion that dark is better for you than milk. Research has shown that flavanols can help prevent blood clots. The study that the *Telegraph* refers to found that smokers who ate the chocolate had 'smoother' blood flow for up to eight hours. But the study

also notes that 'the effects of chocolate on cardiovascular health are still a matter of debate' and admits there may be risks due to its effect on weight.

Whatever the truth, dark chocolate is becoming more popular. Tesco doubled its orders of dark chocolate Easter eggs this year to meet increased demand. The Friedenthal family are converts. Anna told us: 'We bought the children dark chocolate Easter eggs and they wanted to eat them before any others.' The Williams were less keen, though: 'We bought a bar of chocolate with 85 per cent cocoa solids but had to throw it away because we didn't like it.'



Chocolate lovers would plainly enjoy 420g a week

'It was the last straw when I went to the Chinese and ordered broccoli in oyster sauce'

BLUEBERRIES AND OTHER BERRIES

Packed with vitamins C and E and potassium, blueberries have been hailed 'true health heroes'.

Their claimed benefits include preventing diarrhoea, food poisoning, the signs of ageing and gout; they are also supposed to keep blood pressure in check. There have even been reports that eating them could help treat Alzheimer's disease, although this claim has yet to be proven.

It seems that one of the biggest disadvantages of eating blueberries is the inroads they make into your grocery budget. A handful of these little fruits can set you back about £3 out of season. Alison Williams said: 'We liked eating them in smoothies, but the cost



Ella Friedenthal helps dad Jon make a berry smoothie

of fresh blueberries is prohibitive.'

Frozen blueberries are a cheaper option, especially if you are following our families' lead and enjoying them in a smoothie.



A handful of out-of-season blueberries can set you back £3



BROCCOLI

How broccoli helps you combat cancer: scientists find the hidden chemicals that repair cells

DAILY MAIL, 8 FEBRUARY 2006

Broccoli could claim to be one of the first superfoods, thanks to its high levels of vitamins A, C and E.

It's undoubtedly good for you, but can this innocent green vegetable really claim to beat cancer? The jury is still out. Research has shown that a naturally occurring chemical in broccoli called I3C can boost the body's ability to repair itself and, in turn, may prevent cancer. Further research is needed, though, as this effect has been seen only in the laboratory.

Sasha and Ella get to grips with the dreaded broccoli



As with many of the other superfoods, headlines seem to have affected sales: we ate 7 per cent more broccoli in 2005 than in 2004. But as our families found, it is still a challenge to get children to eat it. 'We eventually got them to eat it in cheese sauce, or deep-fried in a fondue,' said Jon Friedenthal.

Even Anna – the keenest broccoli eater – found it impossible to eat every day. 'It was the last straw when I went to the Chinese and had to order broccoli in oyster sauce!' she told us.

MEMBER BENEFIT

Win a Best Buy juicer, health grill and steamer

Shape up for summer with our healthy-eating package.

We're offering an Antony Worrall Thompson JE15 juicer,

a Breville HG20 grill and a Tefal 3-Tier Ultra Compact steamer, plus £100-worth of Waitrose vouchers



Worth £285

TO ENTER, SIMPLY ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION

Pomegranates contain a high level of which vitamin?

To enter our Best Buy competition online, go to www.which.co.uk/bestbuy and send your entry on a postcard to 'Best Buy August 06', Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH. Include your name, address and postcode, daytime phone number and Which? membership number (on your Which? membership card as your user name). Entries received by 30 August 2006 will be entered. Usual rules apply – go to www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition or see Which?, July 2006, p49.

Checklist

Nutrition expert Cath Collins explains how adopting the same diet as people in the Mediterranean is the healthiest option

Cath Collins suggests the following healthy approach to eating: 'No one food has every health benefit and people like novelty, so you need to eat a whole range of healthy food to keep up your momentum.'

'A healthy diet has got to be a lifelong commitment.'

She regards the so-called 'Mediterranean' diet as the gold standard.

Crudely, this is based on:

- lots of cereal-based complex carbohydrates, such as rice, wheat or oats
- lots of different fruit and veg, making sure

- you get a good variety of colours in your diet
- modest amounts of meat and dairy
- oily fish
- cooking with olive or canola oil.

'If you can eat this kind of diet regularly, over a long period of time, you shouldn't really have to worry about including specific superfoods in your meals,' added Cath.

