

Are Goji Berries Really the Healthiest Food on the Planet?

Q You recently covered acai berries and mangosteen. What about goji berries—are there any concrete health benefits?

A Yes, goji berries have joined the ranks of other exotic “superfruits” like acai and mangosteen. Goji is being hawked all over the Internet (for about \$30 per 18-ounce bag), because of its “miraculous health benefits.” Some goji companies have called their product the “healthiest food on the planet.” Alleged benefits for goji include immune, vision, memory and sleep enhancement; and stress reduction, anti-aging, cancer protection and anti-inflammation. But is there scientific proof to back these claims?

Ancient Asian medicine. While goji (also known as wolfberry) is enjoying tremendous recognition in the West in recent years, it’s a new name given to

Lycium barbarum and *L. chinense*, two close species with a very long tradition as medicinal plants in East Asia. Many goji products are marketed to come from Tibet or the Himalayas, but most are cultivated in China. Tangy, pink goji berries are commonly dried and may be eaten out of hand or mixed in cereals, salads, smoothies or yogurts. Goji is also available in juice and supplement form.

Goji nutrition. There’s no doubt that goji berries, like many fruits, are rich in nutrients and antioxidants. Scientists are particularly interested in goji’s proteoglycans, polysaccharides (a type of carbohydrate) that show antioxidative properties. Scientists also identified a total of 52 phenolic acids and flavonoids (compounds with high antioxidant activity) from the fruit. Recent research indicates goji inhibits prostate cancer cell growth in mice and improves serum antioxidant biomarkers in healthy humans. In a 2008

randomized, double-blind placebo-controlled trial of healthy adults published in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, daily consumption of goji juice increased feelings of general well-being and improvements in neurologic/psychologic performance and gastrointestinal functions. The Natural Standard, a research collaboration on alternative therapies, reports that there is a lack of human clinical data on the efficacy of goji, but the area of laboratory and animal research is growing.

Goji or bust? Until research proves otherwise, treat goji like any other high-antioxidant fruit. Sure, goji berries are rich in nutrients that might protect your health, but don’t limit yourself (or your pocketbook) to these exotic berries. Choose from a variety of fruits and vegetables that possess a symphony of natural plant compounds and nutrients that can protect your health in many ways.

Phthalates Hidden in Plastics—Urban Legend or Real Risk of Danger?

Q I heard that phthalates found in plastics are harmful. Is this true?

A Plastics have been at the forefront of urban legends, but in the case of phthalates there is legitimate concern. Phthalates are a group of chemicals called plasticizers that are added to vinyl plastics to make them flexible. They are commonly found in household and personal care items like toys, packaging, hoses, raincoats, shower curtains, nail polish and shampoo.

Phthalate worries. According to Rolf Halden, Ph.D., P.E., assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, phthalates are environmental contaminants that can exhibit hormone-like behavior by acting as endocrine disruptors in humans and animals. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that the health effects of phthalates in people are not yet fully known, but several studies explore possible associations with developmental and reproductive outcomes (semen quality, genital development in boys and shortened pregnancy.) In July 2008, the U.S. Congress passed legislation banning six phthalates from children’s toys and cosmetics.

Unfortunately, exposure to phthalates is nearly ubiquitous through air, water, skin, food and even medical tubing. The Environmental Working Group (EWG), a public and environmental health advocacy group, analyzed data from the CDC in 2005 and determined that 84 percent of the U.S. population is contaminated with at least six different phthalates at any given time. Hence, EWG is currently pushing for a cumulative assessment of the human health risks of phthalates.

Phthalates in the food system. Studies have found that phthalates may be found in fat-containing foods; migrate into foods from plastic food wrappings, recycled fiber materials like paper and possibly printing inks used on wrappers; and enter foods during processing due to the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) in food production and general contamination of the environment. Heating plastics can leach phthalates from containers into water and food.

On phthalate alert. To reduce exposures to phthalates, EWG suggests:

- Check the ingredient list of beauty products for dibutyl phthalate (DBP.)
- Use personal care and household

products that do not contain “fragrance,” which commonly includes the phthalate DEP.

- Avoid cooking or microwaving in plastic.
- Use a non-vinyl shower curtain.
- Use paints and other hobby products in well-ventilated areas.
- Give children phthalate-free toys.
- Urge medical facilities to reduce the use of products containing phthalates.
- Avoid products made of flexible PVC or vinyl plastic like PVC lawn furniture and building materials.
- Visit Skin Deep (www.cosmetics-database.com), EWG’s database of personal care products with safety ratings based on toxicity.

Write to us if you have a question. We’ll answer those of most interest to our readers. We regret, however, that we cannot personally respond. Send to:

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