



Celery, the wonder vegetable

GOOD LIVING

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What nutrients do oranges, carrots and pie contain? Only within the last one and half century has science begun to identify the components of food – and the search continues. At the beginning of the 20th century only four components of food were known: water, proteins, carbohydrates and fats.

Since 1960, the list of nutrients was considered finished with the addition of vitamins and minerals as food components. However, in the 1980's advances in methods of chemical analysis enable the discovery of hundreds of new components, specifically in plant-based foods. The search continues to surprise with new components that – although present in minute amounts in fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes – have significant preventive and healing capacities.

Herbs are medicines from plants. What we fail to appreciate readily is that, foods from plants are actually herbs, yet we take them in our diet daily to improve our health improves. The greater the variety of foods we take from plants, the more likely we are to consume a wide range of chemical compounds beneficial to our health.

Method and duration of preparation and the temperature of cooking are crucial in ensuring minimal loss of nutrients. Eating food "as grown" is best. Freezing conserves most of plant vitamins and other properties of vegetables. Artificial ripening sometimes does not add up. According to the Journal of Food Science, a study reported in 1973 by Pantos C. E. showed that artificially ripened tomatoes contain 33 per cent less vitamin C as compared to those ripening on the vines. Canning is the least effective method of processing foods. However, it is the safest and has the longest shelf life. Cutting and chopping or grating vegetable tissues accelerates the loss of nutrients and vegetables prepared this way should be consumed immediately.

Cooking in water minimises loss of vitamins and minerals, though as little water as possible should be used. It is advisable to place vegetables in boiling water. Do not to leave vegetables in the water after they are cooked as this prevents further dissolving of mineral salts. Scientists at New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine studied two groups of diabetic patients who ate similar diets for six weeks. One group ate meals cooked at high temperatures, while the other ate foods that were prepared using lower

temperatures and longer cooking times. Those on the slow-cooked diet had a 40 per cent decrease in advanced glycation end products – substances found in food that can hasten vascular disease. Researchers speculate that a healthy diet of gently cooked foods will reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Vegetables provide the body with water. About 90-95 per cent of vegetables is water. They also contain alkalinising minerals such as potassium and calcium. Vitamins A, C, B and K are all mainly plant-based. Vegetables are sources of fibre, proteins, carbohydrates and phytochemicals.

Celery is a refreshing and invigorating vegetable. It is used in salads when raw. It combines well with onion broth and both act as alkalisers and eliminate acidic metabolic body residues. It contains an essential oil, which has remarkable diuretic (urine producing) effects, which reduces oedema (swelling). Celery, particularly if drunk as a broth, helps eliminate uric acid in the body decreasing gout. Despite having high levels of sodium at 87 mg per 100gms – which makes it an important ingredient of making celery salt – it has a hypotensive (blood pressure lowering) effect because of an essential oil, 3-butylptalide, which has vasodilator action. This combined with its diuretic effect makes celery useful in hypertension.

A study done in Singapore in 1995 showed its capacity to lower blood cholesterol. During eight weeks, two groups of guinea pigs were fed on a very high fat diet. Two tablespoonfuls of celery juice were added daily to the diet of one of the groups. At the end of eight weeks, these animals recorded significantly lower cholesterol levels than those that had not been fed on celery. Celery contains a small amount of glycoquin, a substance similar in action to insulin, which reduces blood sugar levels. It also contains psoralens, substances that can produce hypersensitivity to light in susceptible individuals.

Due to the presence of psoralens, celery has protective effects in cases of psoriasis, a disease that is difficult to treat characterised by reddish eruptions and scales on the skin. Celery can be taken as fresh juice made using stalks and leaves. One half glass is drunk with each meal with lemon added to taste.

Celery consumption is not recommended for pregnant women, particularly during the first trimester since it can cause uterine contractions and increase the risk of miscarriage. Celery is used in preparing broths, whether alone or with onions, parsley, nettles or cabbage.