

Better Together: Food Pairings for a Nutritional Powerhouse

Food Combos for Optimal Health

By Chan Tran



Yogurt and oatmeal go together like PB&J -- except it's good for you. - George Doyle/Stockbyte/Getty Images

Like peanut butter and jelly or chips and salsa, some foods are just meant to go together. But unlike these combos, some foods pair well not just for taste -- but for better nutrition.

When specific components in food interact, they have a synergistic effect, producing

health-promoting benefits that surpass eating either food alone.

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Robin Barrie Kaiden, RD

Tomato & Broccoli

If you're concerned about your prostate health, consider having a bowl of homemade tomato soup with a side of steamed broccoli for lunch.

These vegetables are known for their cancer-fighting properties -- and, according to a University of Illinois study funded by American Institute for Cancer Research and the USDA, the broccoli-tomato combo is better at shrinking prostate tumors than when you eat either vegetable alone.

"Scientists currently believe that the two foods contain different compounds that work on separate anticancer pathways, using separate mechanisms to ward off cancer," Kaiden says.

And cooking your vegetables may be more beneficial than eating them raw. A study published in 2008 in "The Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry" found that cooking increases the total antioxidant capacity of certain vegetables -- including broccoli and tomatoes.

Spinach & Oranges

Popeye may have found his strength from simply eating his spinach right out of the can, but you may want to consider having a little vitamin C along with yours.

Your body needs iron -- found in dark, leafy greens such as spinach, as well as beans and lean meat -- to transport oxygen to your blood cells. But the fact is that the average healthy adult only absorbs about 10 to 15 percent of his dietary iron intake. Vitamin C

aids in iron absorption -- and eating foods rich in iron and vitamin C together can help your body absorb iron to the max.

Try adding 1/2 cup of bell peppers to a corn and black bean salad, or 1 cup of strawberries to a spinach salad, suggests Barrie.

For a quick boost, squeeze vitamin C-rich lime or lemon juice on your iron sources. Use 3 tsp. of lemon or 4 tsp. of lime juice to aim for 10 percent of the Daily Value of vitamin C, suggests Jackie Newgent, a registered dietitian and author of "Big Green Cookbook" and the award-winning "The All-Natural Diabetes Cookbook."

Yogurt & Oatmeal

Jump start your day with a P&P -- prebiotic and probiotic -- parfait. Layer sliced bananas, cooked oatmeal and Greek yogurt -- then drizzle with a little maple syrup or honey.

Prebiotics are indigestible nutrients found in a variety of foods -- especially high-fiber foods -- and include bananas, oatmeal and honey. Probiotics are the beneficial bacteria that live in your gut -- and are also found in fermented foods like yogurt. The pairing of the two contributes to healthy digestion and immune function.

According to the National Institutes of Health, when probiotics and prebiotics are mixed together, they form a symbiotic bond. "They have a synergistic relationship because prebiotics feed the probiotics," says Nancy Clark, a registered dietitian and author of four books geared toward athletes' nutrition needs, including "Sports Nutrition Guidebook."

To avoid the post-lunch bloat, include prebiotics and probiotics in your midday meal. Opt for a

Simple Recipes for Powerful Pairings

If you're short on ideas for meals that include these nutrient-packed combos, Jackie Newgent, author of "Big Green Cookbook" has some tempting suggestions.

Scrambled Veggies and Eggs -- Tomatoes + Broccoli combo

Saute 2 handfuls each of chopped tomatoes and broccoli with a large diced shallot in canola oil until broccoli is crisp tender. Add 2 whisked eggs and scramble. Season with sea salt and black pepper to taste. Sprinkle with Gruyère cheese and fresh tarragon, if desired.

Spinach Salad with Orange Vinaigrette -- Iron + Vitamin C combo

Sprinkle fresh baby spinach with thinly sliced red onion and sliced almonds. Serve with orange vinaigrette on the side: Whisk together 3 tbsp. of canola oil, 2 tbsp. each of cider vinegar and orange juice concentrate, 1 minced shallot, a pinch of sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Greek Breakfast Sandwich -- Prebiotics + Probiotics combo

Saute a handful of chopped onions, leeks, and asparagus in a little oil or butter; add eggs mixed with a dollop of Greek yogurt and scramble until done. Season to taste and serve with kefir cheese or other cheese between whole grain sourdough toast.

Herbal Orange Bulgur Salad -- Whole Grains + Onion/Garlic

Pour 1 1/4 cups of simmering orange juice over 1 cup of bulgur wheat. Stir in a mixture of 1 large diced Spanish onion and 2 minced garlic cloves sauteed in extra-virgin olive oil. Chill. Stir in generous amounts fresh parsley and mint. Add sea salt to taste. Sprinkle with your choice of nuts.

spinach artichoke dip made with yogurt, chopped spinach and artichoke. Add lemon, garlic, sea salt and pepper to taste -- and serve with buckwheat crackers or bread.

Whole Grains & Garlic/Onion

For a mineral boost, try snacking on hummus made with fresh garlic and onions spread on a slice of whole grain bread.

A study published in 2010 in the "Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry" found that combining garlic or onions with whole grains may help boost the absorption of iron --- which is needed for healthy red blood cells --- and zinc, which aids in energy metabolism, immune function and protein synthesis.

According to Kaiden, cysteine, an amino acid found in garlic and onions, increases iron absorption by 70 percent and zinc absorption by 160 percent in whole grains. "After adding 1 to 2 chopped cloves to your recipe, allow it to sit for a few minutes before cooking to maximize your health benefits," she says.

Toss in fennel for an added boost. It not only has its own anti-cancer properties --- fennel also neutralizes garlic breath. Chew on couple of teaspoons after a garlicky meal.

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