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If its Good Enough for Popeye...

Here in Santa Barbara, the spinach salad could very well be a front runner for the title of 'Health Conscious Lunch Favorite'. It might not beat out the Chicken Caesar Salad, but I am often inspired when I see how many people have traded iceberg lettuce and croutons for spinach and goat cheese. Unlike many diet fads, anti aging supplements, or all in one snack bars, spinach has every right to be eaten in large quantities on a daily basis. Popeye had the right idea (although I am not a big fan of the canned stuff myself).

Every "Healthiest Foods" list I have ever seen (in trendy magazine or health journal) always includes spinach. Spinach is loaded with an assortment of vitamins and minerals. It is an extremely good source for calcium as well as magnesium. We have all heard about the importance of calcium in ones diet, but many people don't realize that calcium desperately needs magnesium to perform all of its functions properly. The two work in conjunction to balance many systems in the body (in fact almost every mineral our body utilizes has a partner in crime). For example, calcium helps contract muscles where as magnesium helps relax them. This is one of the reasons why magnesium is sometimes recommended for insomnia or stress.

Spinach is also full of carotenoids, most notably beta carotene, which our liver can convert into vitamin A. Vitamin A is necessary for proper immune functioning, and is required for proper vision. These carotenoids have also been shown to prevent cell mutations that can lead to an assortment of cancers. People who eat diets high in carotenoids are also less likely to develop cataracts. Spinach also contains the phytochemicals zeaxanthin and lutein. These are what create the yellow pigment in the macula of the eye. So it seems that Popeye has got some strong eyes as well.

Spinach can promote health in many other areas as well. Alpha lipoic acid is a potent anti oxidant (that is often included in anti aging tonics) and spinach is a great source for it. It seems to focus its protective effort on the bodies nerve cells. In fact it is so beneficial that researchers in Germany have used alpha lipoic acid to treat nerve damage in patients with adult

onset diabetes. Speaking of diabetes, the manganese in spinach seems to be beneficial to children with diabetes. And of course we cannot forget how good spinach is for pregnant women. The high levels of folate help to prevent birth defects and the large amounts of iron help to fortify the blood.



Some feel that spinach is most nutritious when eaten raw. As with almost everything in nutrition, this is partially correct. It is true that some of the vitamins and minerals can be damaged or lost in cooked spinach. Heat damages some vitamins and certain cooking methods can leach minerals from the spinach. However, raw spinach is very high in oxalic acid, a compound that interferes with the bodies absorption of calcium and other minerals by binding with them and dragging them out of the system.

Cooking spinach reduces this affect dramatically. So once again there is a slight loss either way. But this brings us back to that popular little spinach salad with goat cheese. Not only is this a great combination for our taste buds, but the large amounts of calcium in cheese can help offset the affects of oxalic acid in raw spinach.

Many people detest cooked spinach. I often find that this is because they have never tried properly cooked spinach. Spinach cooks very fast. In fact, when adding it to a stir-fry, sauce, or any other dish on the stove, the residual heat in the pan is often enough to cook the spinach. For example heat a wide skillet to medium heat and add a few tablespoons of olive oil followed by a couple of minced garlic cloves. Let the garlic begin to brown just slightly then pour in a 1/4 cup of white wine. Let the wine reduce for a few minutes then fold in a few handfuls of spinach, and some salt. Now turn off the heat. Continue to stir the spinach allowing the heat to evenly cook the leaves. You'll find that this method allows all of the leaves to be cooked just enough without turning them into mush. Serve properly cooked spinach and your favorite cheese inside an omelet next time you have a breakfast guest and start the day off right.

For more info about spinach and how to best utilize this nutrition powerhouse contact The Educated Vegetable for a cooking class. You won't believe what is possible.

What's Your Favorite Food...?

And I suppose your response might be, "And why do you ask?" Well, it's a bit complicated actually, but since we both have a moment, I'll try to explain. Did you know that many people are in a constant state of allergic reaction? It's true. Many different foods can cause unnecessary immune response in the body which can lead to a variety of symptoms. Bloating, headaches, sneezing, runny nose, itchy eyes, skin rashes, diarrhea, constipation, joint pain, weight gain, depression, and even ADD can all be symptoms of food allergies.

The body has many mechanisms for protecting itself. One of these are the antibodies produced by our immune system. The role of these chemicals is to seek out foreign invaders like viruses and destroy them before they can proliferate in the body. The body notices when foreign proteins are in the blood (like viruses) and sends antibodies to the scene of the crime to deal with the situation. What happens in the case of food allergies is that the body begins to attack the proteins from certain foods that have entered the blood. This can happen because of many different factors. Certain foods are more likely to cause this than others. Generally over consumption of these certain foods without enough necessary digestive support over a long time, or at too young of an age will create this misunderstanding in the body. This is most notable in children that aren't breastfed or given large amounts of easily reactive foods at an early age. Other times allergies appear as a result of some other digestive dysbiosis. Candida, parasites and other overgrowths can create tears in the intestinal lining. These tears allow larger particles of food to pass through into the blood stream than normal. This condition is generally referred to as leaky gut syndrome. The larger than normal particle in the blood can be confusing to the immune system and antibodies will attack soon after. Once the body has 'black listed' certain molecules it is very persistent in its attack.

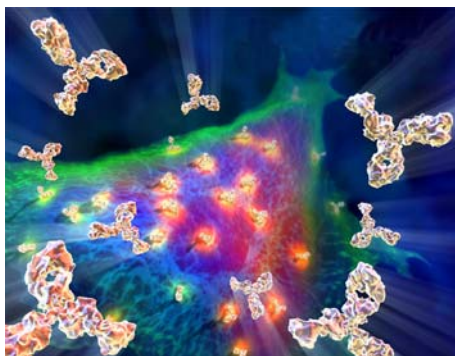
So back to my original question, What is your favorite food? When the body notices foreign invaders in the system not only does it send in the antibodies, but another part of the 'alert' is our brain releasing a barrage of chemicals. Some of these are hormones that raise our temperature, as in a fever, but others include painkillers such as endorphins. Everyone loves a good hit of endorphins. I know I do. In fact endorphins feel so good that many of us are extremely addicted to them. Some exercise to get their fix, while others unknowingly get their fix by eating foods that they are allergic to. See where this is going. What is your favorite food? When you are depressed what do you eat? What do you crave when stress builds a little too high?

Many times this go to food is also the food that one's body is most allergic to.

Most people generally choose milk, wheat, eggs, nuts or soy. These are the five most common foods that cause allergic reactions. I know I fit the mold. You know what my favorite food was when I really thought about it? I love almond butter. I am one of those guys that can sit down with a jar in one hand and a

spoon in the other and go to town. Ding Ding Ding!!! We have a winner. Turns out, I am moderately allergic to tree nuts.

So how does one find out if they are allergic to certain foods? There are two ways. The easiest, but more expensive, is to have a naturopath or nutritionist take your blood and have it screened for allergies. These modern blood screenings are very effective and accurate in comparison to the older methods of skin pricking etc. The less expensive way is to abstain from possible problem foods for at least one week. If one is allergic to these foods they should notice certain symptoms lessen or disappear. The real test, however, is to reintroduce each food one at a time. For example, remove dairy from the diet for one week (no cheating!) and then on the eighth day eat dairy with every meal and notice what happens during the day and the next 24 hours. If dairy is creating an immune response the juxtaposition between the clean week and the binge day should be very clear.



The new knowledge that one is allergic to certain, often times favorite, foods can be a bit depressing. Combine this with the possible withdrawal from the constant flow of endorphins and the whole thing might feel impossible. Don't give up hope. As with any other addiction the first weeks are the hardest, but over time cravings slip away and the improvements in health suddenly feel better than the original offenders.

There are many ways to support this change in lifestyle. Certain amino acids have been shown to be very useful in balancing hormones and emotions. The affects from these can be very powerful and it is best to consult a nutrition professional before engaging in amino acid therapy. However, one amino acid that is helpful for just about everyone recovering from allergies is l-glutamine. L-glutamine can be very useful in two areas. The first is the regeneration of muscle tissue (including that of the digestive track) Remember, many allergies are related to leaky gut syndrome. It also can be used to control sugar cravings. Many times people crave sugary versions of the foods they are highly addicted to. The cocktail of sugar and endorphins is pretty potent.

Another option is to seek out non reactive alternatives to foods that need to be removed from the diet. In the example of milk allergies, some people will turn to goats milk. The proteins in goats milk are different than cows milk so some people with milk allergies can tolerate goats milk. If not, there is soy (assuming this doesn't cause a reaction) or rice and nut milks. In the case of wheat allergies, there are many bread, cereal, cracker and pasta alternatives available at natural foods store these days. Many of these are very good and available at moderate prices.

Of course there is also the option of hiring a natural chef service, such as The Educated Vegetable to create meals and snacks that satisfy one's individual cravings. Often times people discover that it isn't a particular food that they crave, but actually a certain flavor or texture. Dairy free cheese, egg free baked goods, and wheat free desserts are only the tip of the iceberg. Utilizing his training in nutrition education and natural food preparation, Chef Micah Elconin N.E. of The Educated Vegetable is sure that he can create extremely enjoyable alternatives and maybe some other new favorites as well. Initial consultations are always free of charge.

