



# DIABETES super foods: A TOP 10 LIST

Some foods are chock full of amazing health-promoting compounds. Find out what they are and how they may help you **By Rosie Schwartz, RD**



For many people, healthy eating often means focusing only on what to cut out of their diet. Foods with added sugar are at the top of that list. But for the best health benefits, it is also wise to focus on what you *should* eat to take advantage of what various foods can offer.

Superfoods are a good example. They contain a variety of nutrients that have a range of benefits, such as helping to manage blood glucose (sugar) levels, providing some defence against heart disease, high blood pressure, and kidney disease. Many contain antioxidants that fight against compounds known as free radicals, which are thought to cause cell damage and may be produced in higher amounts in people with diabetes.

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“Instead of breading fish and frying it, a healthier option is to keep it in its natural state: Poach, bake, or grill the fish with seasonings, lemon, and olive oil.”

– Joanne Lewis, diabetes education manager, Canadian Diabetes Association



However, Joanne Lewis, diabetes education manager for the Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA), cautions against looking at superfoods as a “magic bullet” that will fix everything. “They are just part of a healthy diet,” she says. “Even if you are consuming them, your meal balance and carbohydrate intake throughout the day still count, especially if you have diabetes.”

Here is a list of the top 10 foods with specific nutritional benefits for those living with diabetes.

## 1 Legumes

**Examples** dried peas and beans (also called pulses), such as lentils, chickpeas, and kidney beans

**Benefits** contain soluble fibre that lowers blood cholesterol and helps to regulate blood sugar levels; potassium to keep blood pressure at healthy levels; plant protein, which is good for vegetarians and meat eaters, and is linked to healthier kidney function in people with diabetes

## 2 Nuts and seeds

**Examples** peanuts, almonds, walnuts, pumpkin seeds

**Benefits** may lower the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and help to control blood sugar levels; contain healthy fats and fibre to lower blood cholesterol; contain high levels of antioxidants that fight free radicals; low in carbs, making them a terrific addition to snacks

**Tip** Avoid seasoned nuts, which can be high in salt and calories. An easy tip for portion control? Lewis recommends shelling them yourself, as the time and effort needed to do so can help to keep serving sizes in check.

## 3 Whole-grain foods

**Examples** quinoa, barley, large-flake oats

**Benefits** contain fibre, and a range of nutrients, including magnesium, which protect against the development of type 2 diabetes; help to control blood sugar; protect against developing certain cancers (such as breast, prostate, and colon cancer), as well as heart disease, stroke, and weight gain

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## 4 Cold-water fish

**Examples** salmon, sardines, mackerel, white albacore tuna

**Benefits** rich in omega-3 fats that guard against heart disease and stroke; anti-inflammatory properties (inflammation is thought to play a part in developing a range of diseases, including heart disease, stroke, and cancer); lower blood pressure

## 5 Dark leafy greens

**Examples** spinach, kale, collard greens

**Benefits** contain disease-fighting compounds such as carotenoids, such as beta-carotene, natural pigments that are a type of antioxidant that may help to defend against heart disease, stroke, and eye conditions such as cataracts and macular degeneration (the leading cause of blindness in the elderly); source of antioxidants that fight cell damage, and potassium that helps to regulate blood pressure

**Tip** If you take a blood-thinning medication such as warfarin, it is important to eat a consistent amount of these vegetables to regulate your medication dosages, so check with your doctor before making any major changes to your diet.

## 6 Vegetables in the allium family

**Examples** onions, garlic, leeks, shallots, chives

**Benefits** supply heart-healthy compounds that may protect against different types of cancer

## NUTRITION matters

### 7 Berries

**Examples** strawberries, blueberries, raspberries

**Benefits** source of antioxidants, fibre, and compounds that may help protect against coronary artery disease, certain cancers, and loss of memory and thinking skills

**Tip** You can enjoy berries all year round: Plan ahead by freezing berries when they are in season for the winter months, or buy frozen unsweetened berries at your supermarket.

### 8 Citrus fruits

**Examples** oranges, tangerines, clementines

**Benefits** excellent source of antioxidants, including vitamin C; potassium; B vitamins such as folate; fibre

**Tip** Citrus juices can raise blood sugar levels quickly; choose whole fruits instead.

### 9 Extra virgin olive oil

**Benefits** good source of antioxidants, such as vitamin E; a healthy source of fat (monounsaturated) that can help to lower blood cholesterol

**Tip** You can help your body better absorb a vegetable's fat-soluble nutrients such as beta-carotene by adding this oil to your dishes.

### 10 Tea

**Examples** green and black

**Benefits** full of antioxidants that help protect against cell damage

**Tip** Avoid teas with added sugar.

#### A WORD OF CAUTION

Lewis recommends incorporating a variety of superfoods in your diet rather than putting an emphasis on one food only (such as goji berries or pomegranates, each of which has been considered a superfood at one time or another).

## Did you know?

Eating foods with a low glycemic index (GI)—carbohydrate-containing choices that raise blood sugar levels more slowly than standard foods such as white bread—can help you to manage your diabetes better. To read more from "The Glycemic Index," visit [diabetes.ca/glycemicindex](http://diabetes.ca/glycemicindex).

It is easy to include superfoods in everyday eating. Here are a few recipes for you to enjoy.



Onions—a member of the allium family—are a flavourful addition to roasted vegetables. Here is an example from my book, *The Enlightened Eater's Whole Foods Guide* (Viking Canada).

#### ROASTED SESAME CABBAGE AND ONIONS

8 cups (2 L) sliced (¼-inch/0.5 cm thick) cabbage (about half a cabbage)

2 cups (500 mL) thinly sliced onions

1 tbsp (15 mL) vegetable oil

Non-stick vegetable oil cooking spray

1 tbsp (15 mL) mirin (Japanese rice wine) (optional)

1½ tbsp (22 mL) sodium-reduced soy sauce

1½ tsp (7 mL) sesame oil

2 tbsp (25 mL) rice wine vinegar

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Preheat oven to 450°F (230°C). Combine cabbage and onion in a large bowl. Add vegetable oil; toss to coat. Spread onto a large baking sheet (or 2 medium) sprayed with cooking spray; roast for 15 minutes. Using spatula, move cabbage slices from centre of sheet toward outside to ensure that all slices are evenly roasted. Bake for another 10 to 15 minutes or until edges of cabbage are browned.

Place cabbage and onion in a large bowl. Combine remaining ingredients and pour otop; toss and season to taste with salt and freshly ground pepper. Serve hot or cold.

Makes 4 servings

**Nutritional breakdown per serving:** 14 g carbohydrate, 3 g protein, 6 g total fat, 1 g saturated fat, 5 g fibre, 234 mg sodium, 114 calories

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For those who are intimidated by the thought of cooking fish, here is a method of preparation for you! Use the centre-cut pieces of salmon rather than the tail, as these pieces are thicker and allow for the coating to be placed all around the fish. Serve the salmon with a grain-like brown rice and a green vegetable.

#### ROASTED SALMON WITH A MUSTARD AND HORSE RADISH TOPPING

Non-stick vegetable oil cooking spray

¼ cup (50 mL) light mayonnaise

2 tsp (10 mL) grainy Dijon mustard

1½ tsp (7 mL) prepared horseradish

1 tbsp (15 mL) finely chopped fresh dill

1 tsp (5 mL) fresh lemon juice

¼ tsp (1 mL) lemon zest

⅛ tsp (0.5 mL) freshly ground pepper

6 salmon fillets, each about 120 g (4 oz.)

Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). Prepare a baking sheet by spraying with non-stick cooking spray. Set aside.

In a small bowl, mix together mayonnaise, mustard, horseradish, dill, lemon juice, lemon zest, and pepper. Place salmon on baking sheet, skin side down; coat well with mustard sauce. Roast in oven for 15 minutes, or for 10 minutes per inch (2.5 cm) thickness. Serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings

**Nutritional breakdown per serving:** 1 g carbohydrate, 23 g protein, 11 g total fat, 2 g saturated fat, less than 1 g fibre, 154 mg sodium, 198 calories

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Here is a perfect cold-weather dish from Canadian Lentils, [lentils.ca](http://lentils.ca), that includes both legumes and whole grains. Freeze extra servings in a labelled container for a quick meal when meal prep time is in short supply.

#### AUTUMN RED LENTIL SOUP

1 cup (250 mL) red lentils, rinsed

¼ cup (50 mL) pot barley

5 cups (1.25 L) low-sodium beef broth

250 g (½ lb.) lean ground beef

½ cup (125 mL) chopped onion

2 carrots, chopped

2 celery stalks, chopped

1 cup (250 mL) corn, canned or frozen

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 can (796 mL/28 oz.) diced tomatoes with juice

½ tsp (2 mL) salt

½ tsp (2 mL) freshly ground black pepper

1 bay leaf

In a large stockpot, combine lentils, barley, and beef broth. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 30 minutes.

In a non-stick skillet, sauté beef and onion over medium-high heat, until beef is no longer pink, or for about 5 minutes.

Add beef mixture to stockpot along with carrots, celery, corn, garlic, tomatoes, salt, pepper, and bay leaf; return to boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 20 to 30 minutes, or until vegetables are tender, stirring occasionally. Remove bay leaf before serving.

Makes 12, 1-cup (250 mL) servings

**Nutritional breakdown per serving:** 20 g carbohydrate, 12 g protein, 2 g total fat, 0 g saturated fat, 4 g fibre, 160 mg sodium, 140 calories