

Viewpoint: ‘Superfood’—a lucrative marketing term with no scientific basis

Walking through the grocery aisle, there is an overwhelming number of new superfoods to choose from. Hemp hearts are full of alpha linolenic acid, an anti-inflammatory that can reduce heart disease and cholesterol. You can run for miles fueled only on chia seeds, which are also rich in antioxidants, fiber, iron, and calcium. Acai and goji berries are high in amino acids, antioxidants, and vitamins C, A, B1, B2, and E, all of which damage free radicals, boost your energy and support overall immunity. So I dutifully include all of these to my morning oatmeal and I feel energetic and ready to tackle the day!

But, with all this effort, I still don't really know what a superfood is...

“Superfood” is not defined

The actual term, “superfood”, is not a term regulated by the FDA. While these foods are thought to be exceptionally dense in nutrition, they do not actually have their own food group. They are called ‘super’ because they contain superior nutritional benefits for the amount of calories they contain. Basically, more bang for your buck, but there is more to the story as it relates to its terminology.

The [American Heart Association](#) defines superfoods as “nutritious foods that, when added to an already balanced diet, can bring health benefits.” They reference Beans and Legumes, Berries, Dark Leafy Greens, Nuts and Seeds, Oats, Pumpkin, Salmon, Skinless Poultry, and Yogurt. Sounds a lot like the makings of the [Mediterranean](#) or [MIND](#) diet to me.



One thing the AHA states right off the bat, even before addressing specific foods, is that superfoods *alone* will not make you healthier.

Superfoods alone will not make you healthier? I thought that was the point of a *Superfoods* – they could do it all!

Unfortunately, no. So don't throw out your groceries and stock the fridge only with hemp hearts, beans, and berries.

While they won't turn you into a superhero, so-called superfoods *are* packed with nutrients with protective and combatant properties. What has become evident is that the foods labeled as superfoods are the ones that have 'more' nutrition. For instance, 2 tablespoons of hemp hearts have a bit more protein than an egg. Blueberries and blackberries have more [antioxidants](#) than pineapples and may help ward off cancer. Salmon has more omega-3 healthy fats and can help prevent heart disease. And, yes, dark leafy greens are healthier than iceberg lettuce. But that's not all that's happening here.

“Superfood” as a lucrative marketing term

The term “superfood” is an attractive word, no doubt an eye-catching phrase in your google search.

Ultimately, these *super*-terminologies really just mean *super*-sales. Marketing companies have taken note and capitalized on the viral effects of such catchphrases. According to a [Nielsen](#) survey, consumers are willing to pay more for foods perceived as healthy, and health claims on labels seem to

help. Unsurprisingly, foods that already carry a “healthy” perception *and* carry certain beneficial claims on labels have shown the greatest sales.

The incentive to market superfoods as such has not been missed by the food industry. They know the term has no concrete meaning, but they know it will boost sales. According to [Mintel](#)’s research, there was a 36% increase in the number of foods and beverages that were marketed with the “superfood”, “super-grain” or “superfruit” label since 2015. The U.S. was the leader in these product launches.



Beneath the comforting concept lies a disappointing reality of industry bias

Dr. Marion Nestle, nutrition and public health professor emerita at New York University, details the gimmick in her new book, “Unsavory Truth”. She uncovers the role of marketing and how highlighting special health benefits makes the products more appealing to customers.

“When marketing imperatives are at work, sellers want research to claim that their products are ‘superfoods,’ a nutritionally meaningless term,” she wrote.

“One of the things I noticed was that there were [studies on] all these foods that are demonstrably healthy. Why would you need to do research to prove that blueberries or raspberries or pomegranates or grapes are healthy? Of course they’re healthy. So the only reason they are doing it is because they’re trying to increase market share.”

– Dr. Marion Nestle

She calls out the fact that [the U.S. Department of Health and USDA’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#)

does *not* recommend focusing on a singular food or food group for better health, but instead calls for a variety of “healthy eating patterns” of various [fruits, vegetables](#), grains and more. The inverse of how singular “superfoods” are marketed.

What we are suggesting is that the term is useful as a sales driver as well as an identifier of health. We simply would warn that the term can blind consumers to equally nutritious options that are not as hyped-up, thus depriving us of other nutritious choices.

How do we determine truth from hype?

The answer is in the whole picture! We are all fairly well acquainted with blueberries as a popular superfood. They are high in antioxidants, specifically anthocyanins, that have been reported to inhibit the growth of cancerous human colon cells, and they aid in protecting the body from free-radicals.

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But the human body is complex. To truly examine the effect a food has on our body, we must consider not only our diet but our genetics, our lifestyle, our activity level—things that vary greatly from person to person. What might have super-effects on you might have inverse effects on me. Not from the food alone necessarily, but from the combination of our genes and other lifestyle factors such as sleep, stress, and love.

What’s a person to do about this super-vague label?

Each day, eat 5 to 7 servings of vegetables and 3 to 5 servings of fruit – whether they are ‘super’ or not. We need to ensure we have a balanced diet. And that means increasing our range of nutritious foods in our diets, rather than focusing on a handful of foods that claim to be ‘better’.

Carrots, apples, and onions, for example, have not been touted *yet* as a “superfoods”, however they contain beta-carotene, flavonoids, and fiber that we need. Whole grains found in cereals, bread, rice, and pasta are also high in fiber and fortified with vitamins and minerals, making it easy for many to consume to achieve recommended daily intake.

The bottom line

When it comes to searching for foods with beneficial health effects, strive for a well-balanced diet – not a handful of claimed “superfoods”. These foods just don’t exist. Beneath these flashy health claims, the nutritional advice remains the same: eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, and legumes every single day.

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