

the Medicinal Value of Plant Food

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Over the past three decades, scientists have done extensive research on the chemical components contained in a variety of plant foods, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, seeds and nuts. In doing so, they've gleaned a vast amount of information on their medicinal value.

The chemical components that have been studied in plant foods are often referred to as phytochemicals – phyto means “plant.” These remarkable substances have the ability to prevent disease and heal disease and they may produce favorable results for both you and your birds.

While we've always known that eating our vegetables was the right thing to do, we now have even more incentive to eat them and to serve them to our birds. It is very important to eat at least 3-5 servings of vegetables per day and 2-4 servings of fruit per day. This advice is no less important to heed when it comes to feeding your birds.

We know that plant foods can provide our birds and us with outstanding nutrition, but these newly found medicinal substances in plant foods go far beyond basic nutrition. I will discuss some of the phytochemicals that are beneficial to health and list the foods that contain them, beginning with one of my favorites, garlic.

Allicin

Allicin is a substance contained in garlic and is an effective antibiotic, antifungal and antiparasitical. Garlic contains a number of other substances that contribute health benefits. Garlic may, in addition to being an antimicrobial, stimulate cancer-fighting cells and assist with the amelioration of many other health problems. Garlic can be fed fresh and raw, but in very small amounts due to its potent composition. A garlic extract can be given as a supplement and added to your bird's fresh meals.

Alpha-linolenic Acid

Alpha-linolenic acid is an omega-3

fatty acid and is found in flaxseed oil, fish liver oil and fish oil. This substance strengthens the immune system, may prevent cancer, reduces inflammation, and is known to be helpful for arthritis patients.

Alpha Lipoic Acid

Alpha lipoic acid is an antioxidant sulfur-containing compound and has been classified as a coenzyme. It is found in Brewer's yeast, spinach, carrots, yams, broccoli, and red potatoes. In conjunction with four B vitamins it functions to maintain proper metabolism of fats, proteins, and carbohydrates for energy. Lipoic acid may prevent degenerative diseases such as cataracts, cancer, heart disease, and arthritis and is considered one of the best treatments for diabetes. It is also a chelating agent and as such binds to toxic metals and removes them from the body. It may additionally prevent damage from radiation.

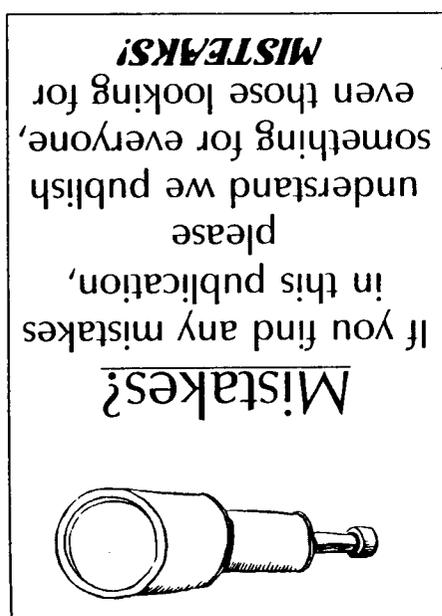
Bioflavonoids

Bioflavonoids include hesperidin, quercetin, rutin, and catechin and they are sometimes referred to as vitamin P. Bioflavonoids possess antioxidants properties and often occur with vitamin C in fruits and vegetables as they work in conjunction with vitamin C to enhance its absorption.

Bioflavonoids are found in the pulp and white rind just beneath the peel of citrus fruits, along with cherries, blackberries, blueberries, apricots, apples, grapes, peppers, soybeans, garlic, buckwheat, and leafy vegetables. Bioflavonoids may be helpful for reducing pain, healing bruises, protecting the structure of the capillaries, and have been known to possess antibacterial properties, aid in the prevention of cataracts and cancer, and possibly help fight viruses.

Capsaicin

Capsaicin is a compound found in chili peppers and chili peppers are a member of the Capsicum family. This compound is highly regarded for its ability to lower cholesterol and can alleviate symptoms of sinus congestion, keeping the air passages clear.



Capsicum can be used to stop bleeding, aid in digestion, improve circulation, and may neutralize carcinogens and boost the immune system. Ointments that contain capsaicin relieve arthritic and nerve pain. Many birds adore chili peppers.

Ellagic Acid

Ellagic Acid is a plant phenol that helps to counteract carcinogens by blocking the body's production of the enzymes that cancer cells need to grow, thus preventing the development of cancer. This compound can be found in grapes, strawberries, raspberries, apples and some nuts.

Indoles

Indoles are found in plants of the cruciferous family, i.e., cabbage, Brussels sprouts, kale, broccoli, mustard greens, radishes, bok choy, and cauliflower. Indoles are compounds that inhibit the growth of cancer. Crucifers also contain brassinin and sulforaphane. These substances boost the body's production of the enzymes that disable potential carcinogens and then remove them from the system.

Limonene

Limonene from oranges, limes and lemons boost the body's production of enzymes that break down carcinogens and stimulate cancer-destroying immune cells. Citrus fruits also contain glucarase, which neutralizes carcinogens and flushes them out of the body. Limonene is also found in celery, cardamom and caraway and fennel seeds.

Lycopene

Lycopene is a carotenoid found in red grapefruit, tomatoes, red peppers, red cabbage, watermelon, strawberries, raspberries and red grapes. This antioxidant substance protects the body against various forms of cancer.

Monoterpenes

Monoterpenes are potent antioxidants that protect the body from cancer and heart disease. They are found in citrus fruits and vegetables such as broccoli, parsley, cabbage, cucumber and carrots.

Phenols

Phenols also known as phenolic acids, are powerful antioxidants that are found in potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, parsley, squash, yams, celery, carrots, cabbage, soybeans, flaxseed, whole grains, fruits, including citrus, some nuts and garlic. Phenols have antiviral properties and also neutralize certain carcinogens and therefore guard against cancer. There are more than 200 phenolic acid compounds.

Protease Inhibitors

Protease Inhibitors prevent the digestion of protein by inhibiting the action of the enzymes, chymotrypsin and trypsin. Protease inhibitors reduce inflammation of arthritis, help normal healthy cells from becoming cancerous and have antiviral and antibacterial potential. Soybeans, chickpeas, kidney beans, tofu, flaxseeds and oats are some of the foods that contain these inhibitors.

Pycnogenols (OPCs)

Pycnogenols (OPCs) are substances found in grape seeds and can also be found in peanuts, cranberries, blueberries, cherries, plums and citrus peel. These substances are bioflavonoids, which have a high degree of antioxidant activity and may be helpful for conditions, such as allergies, arthritis, cardiovascular system problems, vision disorders, diabetes, and stress reduction.

Terpenes

Terpenes help to control cholesterol, prevent heart disease and stimulate enzymes that prevent carcinogens from harming healthy cells. They are found in citrus fruits, such as oranges, lemons, grapefruit and tangerines, and in cherries.

Conclusion

The complexity of naturally occurring substances in plant foods is astounding. It used to be thought that only vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, fats, and fiber in foods were important. We now know that hundreds of other substances in foods help to boost the efficacy of the

immune system, prevent and ameliorate cancer, keep the heart healthy, fight infections, and provide many other health-promoting benefits.

You can do a great deal right now to improve your health as well as your birds' health by incorporating healthy foods into your diet and theirs. Educate yourself and seek professional advice when needed so that you can make an informed choice when selecting foods to eat and to feed your birds. If you choose foods wisely then you and your birds will share good health and a longer life.

Alicia McWatters resides in New Mexico with her family, a flock of five pet birds and many animal friends. She bred African greys and Pionus parrots for a number of years, and currently works as a holistic avian nutritional consultant. She can be reached for a private consultation at (505) 281-5168. Alicia is also the co-author of the book, Super Nutrition for Animals! Birds Too! and the author of A Guide to a Naturally Healthy Bird. To order call (505) 281-5168. 

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