

CHAPTER FOUR

EAT FOOD

WHY YOU DON'T NEED A PH.D.
TO MAKE SMART FOOD DECISIONS

The Top 10 Most Overrated Health Foods

Like it or not, we tend to believe whatever we are exposed to in the media and in advertisements. In nutrition this usually means that as a society we all follow the same diet fads, glorifying some foods over others in the quest for better health. (It's okay. I love salmon and coconut water as much as you do.)

The problem is, though, that more often than not the news or the health claims made by food manufacturers vastly overstate any potential health benefits, because doing so makes a more compelling story and sells more products. Our own confirmation biases tend to make us believe what we're told, we confidently share our insights with our friends, and suddenly our grocery stores are filled with health foods that really aren't all they are cracked up to be. Here are my ten picks for the most overrated health foods.

1. Yogurt

There is nothing innately wrong with yogurt, the natural product. But the real stuff is not nearly as easy to find as the hypersweetened dessert versions filling supermarket shelves. Though yogurt can contain beneficial probiotics, friendly bacteria are also present in other fermented foods like sauerkraut, kimchi, and miso. And if you are worried about acne, dairy is probably not your best choice. Oh, and the overratedness is doubly true of frozen yogurt.

If you'd rather keep yogurt as your breakfast staple (something I often use myself), go for plain yogurt, preferably full fat. Don't fall for the vanilla trap; it is not plain and has even more sugar than most fruit versions.

2. Soy

Soy is another one of those foods that can be perfectly healthy, but can also be processed into oblivion, making it an unhealthy product. Hydrogenated soy oil is among the most common sources of trans fat. Processed products are often touted as healthy just because they contain soy, but soy is not exactly the health panacea it is often

made out to be. For a healthier version, stick to fermented soy products like miso, natto, or tempeh.

3. Egg Whites

It baffles me that Americans continue to vilify the most nutritious part of the egg while glorifying the less impressive half. Sure, egg whites are a good source of protein on their own, but you're probably not lacking protein and would likely benefit from the rich nutrients of the entire egg.

4. Margarine

Why we need artificial processed oils when there are so many naturally healthy sources of fat is beyond me—that is, assuming you can even find margarines that do not contain hydrogenated oils (trans fats). If you really want more stanols and sterols in your diet, try eating more nuts, avocados, and vegetables. If you want to add buttery flavor, just use real butter (preferably from grass-fed cows).

5. Bananas

I have a bit of a reputation for picking on bananas, but I really don't think they're all bad, and they definitely taste yummy. My biggest problems with them are that they are produced industrially and are one of the most calorie-dense fruits you can buy. When is the last time you saw a banana at the farmers market anyway?

Bad for you? Not really.

Overrated? Definitely.

6. Fake Meat

Next time you get a chance, check out the ingredients in your favorite meat substitute. It usually contains a lot of gluten, some processed soy, canola oil, cornstarch, and a few bizarre ingredients like "natural vegetarian flavors" (mmm . . . vegetarians). Call me crazy, but real meat sounds a lot more appealing.

7. Protein Bars

Remember back in the day when protein bars tasted like crap? Well, they would all still taste that way if manufacturers didn't fill them with sugar or sugar substitutes. Look at the ingredients. The vast majority of protein bars contain the same processed junk that's in everything else, just with a few more vitamins, some added soy protein, and possibly some added fiber. Adding nutrients to junk food does not a health food make.

8. Whole-Grain Flour

Ah, whole grains, how controversial be thy name. Though I'm not as antigrain as some folks, I don't pretend that highly processed "whole-wheat flour" is actually good for me. Grains that don't look like grains are not your friends.

9. Low-Fat Salad Dressing

Fat is good for you. Yes, fat contains more calories than protein or carbohydrates, but it also enables you to absorb more vitamins from the foods you eat and makes your meals more satisfying. Fat-free dressings do not make you healthier; they make your salad less nourishing.

10. Fruit Juice

Juicing fruit concentrates the sugar while stripping out the filling fiber. When you remember that one 450-ml (15-ounce) bottle of orange juice is equivalent to six whole oranges, you can start to see the problem. Green juices are fine; just be careful with fruit juices.

Fishing for Answers: How to Choose Fish and Seafood

I don't think there is anything more complicated in the food world than fish and seafood. There are so many life-or-death issues, it's enough to make you want to cover your eyes, plug your ears, and live out the rest of your life in a cave on Mars. But this isn't really one of those issues we can ignore. Beyond the obvious health benefits of seafood, we must consider the consequences of environmental contaminants that accumulate in fish as well as the tragic reality of overfishing and the damage the fishing industry is doing to the environment.

Mercury

Mercury is released into the environment by chlorine plants and coal-fired power plants. Once released from a power plant, mercury settles in nearby aquatic environments, and bacteria there convert it into methylmercury. Residing at the base of the food chain, these bacteria are consumed by plankton, which are then eaten by smaller fish, which are in turn eaten by larger fish. Methylmercury has a seventy-two-day half-life, so it accumulates in animals highest on the food chain. The larger the fish, the more the methylmercury contamination. Predatory fish such as tuna, shark, swordfish, tilefish, and king mackerel have high methylmercury levels. As predatory consumers of large fish, humans are also subject to methylmercury accumulation.

The FDA warns against mercury exposure, particularly for women who are pregnant, may become pregnant, or are nursing, and children under the age of six. Methylmercury is a known neurotoxin that is able to cross the blood-brain barrier into the central nervous system and placenta. It can be dangerous for anyone exposed to high concentrations, but is particularly dangerous to children whose nervous systems are still developing. The FDA recommends that fish with high mercury content be consumed no more than once a month for normal adults and completely avoided by children and pregnant women.

For most fish consumers, tuna is the biggest concern. Bluefin, bigeye, and albacore (white) tuna contain the highest methylmercury

levels. Albacore is sometimes canned, but the most common canned tuna in the United States are yellowfin and skipjack tuna. Skipjack tuna, being a much smaller fish, is relatively low in methylmercury compared to other options. It is usually labeled “chunk light tuna,” but you need to read the label carefully to see that it is not yellowfin or albacore.

PCBs

Farmed fish tend to be lower in mercury concentrations, but much higher in polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). PCBs are chemical contaminants known to cause problems with cognition, reproduction, development, and liver function and can promote endocrine disruption. They are also thought to be carcinogenic. Though their industrial use was banned back in the 1970s, PCB contamination is widespread in American waterways and throughout the world. PCBs pose a problem because virtually all fish have some contamination, but farmed fish, particularly those fed fish meal and fish oils, tend to have more. Farmed fish are also usually less nutritious due to their limited diets. Did you know that all farmed salmon is dyed pink, because naturally it appears gray and unappetizing? Eeeew.

Basic Guidelines

For health, the basic guidelines I recommend include:

- Eat fish two or three times a week.
- Avoid large fish that accumulate mercury like tuna, shark, and swordfish.
- Avoid farmed fish that contain PCBs.
- Seek smaller fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, and sardines.
- Avoid freshwater fish caught by friends. Almost all lakes and rivers are contaminated with high mercury levels.

Seafood Watch List

In matters of sustainability my go-to source is the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch List.³ I don’t know as much about the environment as I do about health, but in general I follow the guidelines below to help myself sleep at night.

BUY FROM TRUSTED SOURCES. Since I personally cannot keep up on all the fish sustainability issues, I am sure to shop at places that do. Most small, high-end seafood vendors do a good job of at least telling you where their fish comes from and will often include sustainability labels.

SHOP AT WHOLE FOODS. Though Whole Foods isn't perfect, it does a great job of labeling the origin of its animal products. This is leaps and bounds over what most grocery stores do.

EAT WILD ALASKAN SALMON. Alaskan fishing regulations are designed to promote sustainability, and their methods have been incredibly effective. Alaskan salmon is also nutritionally superior to Atlantic or farmed salmon.

EAT SARDINES. These little guys are sustainable, healthy, and delicious. I prefer fresh sardines, but I also enjoy the boneless, skinless sardines from cans. Pair with dry-as-a-bone white wine. Yum, yum.

NEVER, EVER EAT BLUEFIN TUNA. These magnificent animals are on the verge of extinction. Don't do it!

EAT FISH AT RESPONSIBLE RESTAURANTS. These days many high-end restaurants proudly label the origin of their fish on the menu. This is not always true, however, especially in Japanese restaurants.

NEVER SHOP AT CHEAP ASIAN FISH MARKETS. Cheap fish equals bad news. Sorry. I know a lot of people rely on these, but personally I do not trust them. Many of the fish sold at these stores are shipped in from China (if the store clerks deny it, they are likely lying to you). China is notorious for intentionally mislabeling its food products. Don't assume the fish from there is either safe or sustainable, regardless of what the label says.

AVOID TUNA. Do you still order maguro (tuna) at sushi restaurants? How boring and unethical. Try getting something that you've never heard of that may be less likely to be overfished. And don't be afraid to ask where it came from.

ASK THE MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM. When in doubt, visit its Super Green List⁴ for the best seafood choices at the moment.

The Top 10 Most Underrated Health Foods

We already know that food manufacturers and the media tend to exaggerate the benefits of popular health foods, but what about all the wonderfully healthy foods they ignore? It's time to shine the spotlight on ten of my favorite healthy foods that never get the attention they deserve.

1. Oysters

Per calorie, oysters are one of the most nutritious foods on the planet and are particularly high in essential omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin D, which is notoriously tough to get from food. Also, because oysters lack a central nervous system and 95 percent of the world's supply is sustainably farmed, some vegetarian thought leaders have argued that oysters can be included in the diet as an ethical source of natural vitamin B₁₂ (present in significant quantities only in animal foods).

2. Sauerkraut and Kimchi

I'm the first to admit that fermented foods can be a little pungent, but that doesn't preclude them from tasting delicious and being one of the healthiest things you can eat. Traditionally, fermentation has been used to preserve foods, but it also serves to increase nutritional value and add friendly bacteria to the gut. These healthy microbes help with digestion and nutrient absorption, and without them our gut health deteriorates substantially, setting the stage for many chronic diseases.

3. Dark and Organ Meats

People often demonize meats, especially the darker varieties, for their fat content and overlook how nutritious they are. Of course, they are relatively higher in calories as well, which is why you don't need to eat very much at a sitting. But fear of saturated fat shouldn't deter you from enjoying the occasional piece of fatty meat every now and then. Organ meats in particular, like liver and kidney, are rich sources of essential nutrients, and they can be delicious when prepared properly.

4. Seaweed

Okinawa is a small island in southern Japan that is home to some of the longest-lived people on earth. Sea vegetables are a staple of the traditional Okinawan diet and are thought to be responsible for many aspects of Okinawans' health. Seaweed is also a good source of iodine for people who prefer to use high-end sea salts or kosher salt for cooking, which lack sufficient iodine. I make an effort to eat seaweed often and try as many different kinds as I can get my hands on.

5. Egg Yolks

I might be beating a dead horse with this one, but until I stop seeing friends and family throwing out perfectly good egg yolks, I'm just going to keep drilling home this point. Egg consumption is not associated with heart disease. Dietary cholesterol has a negligible impact on blood cholesterol, and for some people whole eggs even improve blood lipids. Also, you're throwing away so much tasty goodness. Keep in mind that if you buy fresh, pastured eggs (hens frolicking in grass eating bugs—find them at your local farmers market or health food store), nutrient values will be significantly higher than in conventional eggs.

6. Beans and Lentils

My favorite thing about Tim Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Body* is that it made beans and lentils cool to eat.⁶ I've been telling readers this for years, and finally people are listening, but there are still a lot of folks out there who don't appreciate how wonderful they really are.

For myself and many others, weight loss is much easier when we include beans and lentils rather than eliminating carbohydrates completely. Plus they fill you with energy without the bloating and other negative effects that can sometimes come from grains. They're also a great source of iron, folate, and other essential nutrients.

7. Root Vegetables

Root vegetables are right up there with the green leafies in my book. In fact, many of them are from the same cruciferous family. I never

come home from shopping without at least one bunch of radishes, salad turnips, or carrots. I also have a lot of love for beets, sunchokes, and even potatoes. Vegetables don't need to be green to be good for you.

8. Coffee

Many people view their morning brew as a vice, but in reality coffee is a healthy beverage. Coffee is one of the best sources of polyphenols and antioxidants in many people's diets and has been proven to protect against liver disease, type 2 diabetes, and a host of other diseases. The biggest problem most people have with coffee is confusing the brew itself with the creamy, sugary drinks that are closer to milkshakes than health elixirs. The only real risk of too much coffee is that it can upset your sleep.

9. Hard Cheese

Yes, I just called cheese healthy. But of course I'm not talking about the processed American "cheese" that may or may not contain milk. Sadly, I'm not even talking about burrata. Hard cheeses that have been aged (think parmesan and asiago) are the most significant dietary source of vitamin K₂, a nutrient that has been shown to protect against heart disease and cancer. Like meat, cheese has a lot of calories, so you still have to be careful about how much you eat. But it's important to understand that cheese is not just empty calories, and in reasonable amounts it can actually be good for you.

10. Mushrooms

Americans tend to view mushrooms as a neutral food, but they have been used in Chinese medicine for thousands of years. Though there really isn't enough evidence to make conclusive statements about the health benefits of all mushrooms, many compounds have been identified in mushrooms that show potential for boosting immunity and possibly protecting against cancer. Mushrooms are also an unappreciated source of vitamins and minerals and shouldn't be ignored as low-calorie sponges that only go on pizza.

Sliced Bread Was Never a Great Invention

Food marketers have been at it for nearly a century. They're saving us time, making it ever easier for us to consume their products, and all they ask in return is to charge us a little extra for the "convenience." Aren't they sweet?

When pressed, most of us will acknowledge that the top priority of food marketers is not to make our lives easier or our food tastier, but to get us to eat (and spend) more. What's truly remarkable is that, despite knowing this, we still parrot and defend their ideas as ardently as if we'd thought of them ourselves.

Do you really believe Krispy Kreme makes the best doughnuts, Ben & Jerry's makes the best ice cream, or life is impossibly difficult without presliced bread? My guess is you probably do, or at least did at some point. But the reality is that none of these things are true, and that we think they are is just a sign of brilliant marketing.

Food isn't like other products. There are people who buy every single gadget that Apple creates, and if Apple started making twice as many products per year those people would still buy them all. But humans can only eat so much food, which makes it difficult for food companies to expand their market and be competitive.

Enter "added value."

Sliced bread, instant oatmeal, and single-serving Go-gurt are all examples of foods designed to be easier to eat. And companies correctly assume that we are happy to pay more for the free time these conveniences allot us. But does this freedom really make our lives better?

I would never argue that time doesn't have value. Though I think there is a strong case for slowing down and taking time to eat mindfully, I certainly see the appeal of fast and portable food. Having built, launched, and promoted my own website while simultaneously finishing my Ph.D., I certainly know what it means to be busy. But convenience is not the only thing you get when marketers sell you on their products. You also eat more, and you eat worse.

Because sliced bread is easier to eat, people tend to eat more of it, along with whatever they choose to put on top. Additionally, since

real bread quickly becomes stale when cut into smaller pieces, food companies have had to find new (non-ecofriendly) packaging and add preservatives, dough conditioners, and other chemicals to keep breads soft. The ingredient list on a loaf of Wonder Bread is truly remarkable:

Wheat Flour, Water, High Fructose Corn Syrup or Sugar, Yeast, Contains 2% or Less of: Ferrous Sulfate (Iron), B Vitamins (Niacin, Thiamine Mononitrate (B-1), Riboflavin (B-2), Folic Acid), Barley Malt, Soybean Oil, Salt, Calcium Carbonate (Ingredient in Excess of Amount Present in Regular Enriched White Bread), Wheat Gluten, Dough Conditioners (Sodium Stearoyl Lactylate, Mono and Diglycerides, Calcium Dioxide, Datem and/or Azodicarbonamide), Vitamin D-3, Calcium Sulfate, Vinegar, Yeast Nutrients (Monocalcium Phosphate, Dicalcium Phosphate, Ammonium Sulfate, Ammonium Phosphate and/or Ammonium Chloride), Cornstarch, Wheat Starch, Soy Flour, Whey, Calcium Propionate (to Retain Freshness), Soy Lecithin.

In contrast, the bread I buy at Acme, my local bakery, is made of flour, water, yeast, and salt. Special loaves may contain olives or herbs, but you get the general idea. I have to cut it myself, and it doesn't last long if I leave it on the counter (it freezes absolutely beautifully), but the bread at Acme is also some of the best-tasting bread I've had in my life. Are you shocked that my Acme loaf costs around \$2, while Wonder Bread costs close to \$4?

I don't eat much bread, because it is not particularly healthy. But I enjoy burgers, pizza, sandwiches, naan, and other traditional foods way too much to cut it out completely. Reasonable quantities of bread can easily be incorporated into a healthy diet, particularly if you exercise regularly. But bread is not health food, and eating as little as you're comfortable with is generally a good idea.

We do not need unhealthy foods to be more convenient or less expensive. And if you're going to put health aside and eat them anyway, they should also taste absolutely amazing, not just good or even pretty good. Does presliced bread really make the cut? I don't think so.

Sliced bread was never a great invention—it was great marketing. “The greatest thing since sliced bread” was derived from an ad

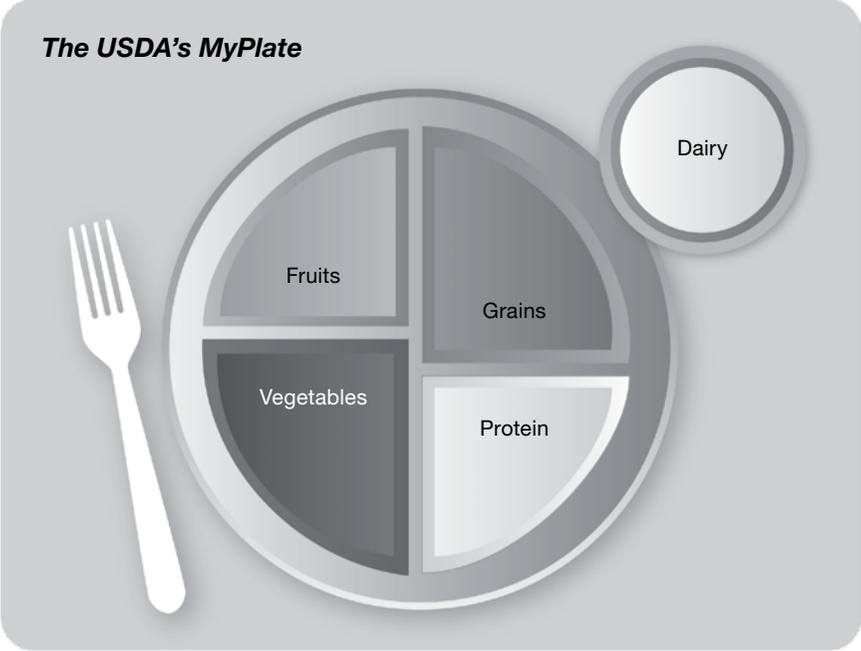
campaign claiming its invention was “the greatest forward step in the baking industry since bread was wrapped.” The phrase may be perfect for describing brilliant marketing (“The greatest added-value campaign since sliced bread”), but do we really need to continue propagating the message that low-quality convenience food is the best invention of the past one hundred years?

If we want a true benchmark for greatness, maybe we should change it to “The greatest thing since the Internet.”

Sugar Content of Some Common Food Products

<i>Item</i>	<i>Grams of Sugar</i>
Krispy Kreme original glazed doughnut	10
Luna Bar, berry almond	11
Froot Loops breakfast cereal, ¾ cup.....	12
Ben & Jerry’s vanilla ice cream, cup.....	16
Starbucks Caffè Latte, 16 ounces	17
Godiva truffles, 2 pieces	17
Subway 6-inch sweet onion teriyaki chicken sandwich	17
Mrs. Fields chocolate chip cookie	19
Tropicana 100% orange juice, 8 ounces	25
Yoplait original yogurt, 6 ounces	27
Craisins dried cranberries, ⅓ cup	29
Vitaminwater, 20 ounces.....	33
Oscar Mayer Lunchables, crackers, turkey, and American cheese.....	36
Coca-Cola Classic, 12 ounces	39
Sprinkles Cupcake, red velvet	45
California Pizza Kitchen Thai chicken salad	45
Jamba Juice, blackberry bliss, 16 ounces	49
Odwalla SuperFood, 15 ounces (450 ml).....	50
Starbucks Caffè Vanilla Frappuccino, 16 ounces.....	58

The USDA's MyPlate



The Foodist's Plate

