

# 18 Power Foods for Every Occasion

- *By Chrissy Wellington Garner | For Active.com*

Power foods are foods that contain the richest amount of nutrients, the least amount of calories, and provide optimal health benefits. Listed below are just a few of the most "powerful" foods.

## Power Foods for Satisfaction

Whole, high-fiber foods are known for being healthy and "filling." When we eat these foods often, satisfaction kicks in and makes us feel fuller, longer.

### Flaxseeds

Flaxseeds contain plenty of protein and fiber and are a great source of the essential omega-3 fat. The essential fat, Alpha linolenic acid, is what makes flax a power food. ALA protects bones by preventing excessive bone turnover. This is very important for an athlete especially, during strenuous exercise. (Griel AE, Kris-Etherton PM, et al. Nutrition Journal)

### Beans

Kidney beans, navy beans, lentils, chickpeas and Northern beans are all high in protein and fiber, as well as iron, folic acid, and potassium. While all beans have "power" benefits, the more colorful beans, such as the red and black, may have an added bonus. They are rich in eight different flavonoids, which is important for illness prevention.

### Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes may taste like a treat but they supply us with an insurmountable amount of nutrition. Sweet potatoes are known for their antioxidant ability, strong anti-inflammatory nutrients, and the power to regulate blood sugar. Sweet potatoes can range in color from orange to purple. Some of their antioxidant powerhouses are the anthocyanin's, cyanidins, peonidins and beta carotene. Recent research has shown that when passing through the digestive tract, the cyanidins and peonidins along with other phytonutrients may be able to lower the abundance of heavy metals and free radicals.

### Barramundi Fish

Barramundi fish is similar to red snapper, striped bass, and Dover sole. Farmed Barramundi is a power food that falls on the "Super Green" list published by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. This list highlights which fish are the "Best Choices" (meaning most sustainable choices). Those on the list are low in environmental contaminants and are also good sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Barramundi is considered a power food because it is low in mercury contamination and low in calories.

### Dark Chocolate

Dark chocolate is included as a power food for its ability to improve overall heart health. It is known to reduce LDL cholesterol and blood pressure, and increase blood flow to the brain. The power of chocolate comes from its flavonoids. Even though dark chocolate has healthy flavonoids, it also contains "not so healthy" sugar, fat and calories. Overindulging can undo any of the health benefits. One ounce per day is all that required to see the benefits.

## **Power Foods for Race Day**

Providing the right type of nutrients at the right time can make or break your performance and your energy.

### **Honey**

Honey has been considered a power food by some researchers who are even declaring it an ergogenic aid. We know that honey has power benefits because of its wound healing ability. During the ancient Olympics, athletes were known to eat special foods, such as honey and dried figs, to enhance their sports performance. Some of the current science finds that honey maintains optimal blood sugar levels for two hours after a workout. Research also found honey to aid in muscle recuperation and glycogen restoration.

### **Quinoa**

Quinoa is an amino acid rich seed (not actually a grain). Quinoa packs a punch in the protein world and contains 11 grams of protein in as little as a ½ cup. Quinoa is rich in magnesium, potassium, zinc, vitamin E, riboflavin and even a little iron. Considered a grain, quinoa is actually a relative of leafy green vegetables like spinach and Swiss chard. Quinoa has a good amount of lysine, which is essential for tissue growth and repair. One phytonutrient abundant in quinoa, is lignans, when converted in the gut is thought to protect against breast cancer and heart disease.

### **Steel Cut Oats**

Steel cut oats contain a fiber known as beta-glucan. Starting out your day with blood sugar stabilizing oats keeps your own levels stable for the rest of the day! Oats, with their high fiber content, are known to help remove cholesterol from the body. Antioxidants, called avenanthramides, found in oats, protect against free radical damage. To make your breakfast more powerful add a little whey protein powder, pumpkin seeds and berries.

### **Pumpkin**

Pumpkin seeds are a stellar source of magnesium, which keeps energy and metabolism high. In animal studies, the addition of pumpkin seeds to the diet has compared favorably with other anti-inflammatory drugs in reducing symptoms. Pumpkin seeds are a very good source of magnesium, manganese, phosphorus, iron, copper, and zinc.

### **Cinnamon**

Cinnamon is considered a power food because of its ability to slow the release of arachidonic acid from cells placing into the anti-inflammatory category of food. Also, when you season higher carbohydrate foods with cinnamon it may also help to stabilize blood sugar levels. When it comes to competition, cinnamon is considered a powerful antioxidant. When compared to other spices, cinnamon actually prevented oxidative stress more effectively.

## **Power Foods to Soothe Aches and Pains**

It's normal to feel a little achy after a tough workout, but cramps or pain could mean you're low on electrolytes like potassium or magnesium. Potassium is an electrolyte that helps to control the fluid balance in the cells and magnesium is important for consistent cellular energy production. Try these foods below to make sure your electrolytes are well-controlled and your inflammation is in check.

## **Avocados**

To boost potassium levels, try avocados. They actually contain more potassium than bananas! The fat found in avocados is oleic acid; it is considered a monounsaturated fat and known to help lower cholesterol.

## **Pacific Sardines**

Pacific Sardines are the number one fish for packing a punch when it comes to omega-3s. They are known to be the most concentrated source. They are low in calories and low in mercury so eat them up as a recovery snack. Sardines are also a good source of B12. Vitamin B12 promotes cardiovascular well-being by keeping homocysteine levels low. Sardines are a rich source of bone building Vitamin D. Vitamin D plays a role in bone health by increasing the absorption of calcium. Sardines are also a good source of phosphorus, which is a mineral that is important in strengthening the bone matrix.

## **Omega-3 Rich Eggs**

Omega-3 rich eggs are considered a power food not only for being a great protein source but also for their levels of choline. Choline is a nutrient that is needed in the cell membranes, where flexibility and integrity are needed most. Choline is also a key component of acetylcholine, which is a neurotransmitter that carries messages to and from nerves. Acetylcholine is the chemical that sends messages between nerves and muscles which can be a factor in performance and reaction time.

## **Turmeric**

Turmeric is an up-and-coming power food in the world of performance. Traditionally used as a powerful anti-inflammatory spice in the Chinese and Indian systems of medicine. The volatile oils of turmeric have demonstrated significant anti-inflammatory results. As an antioxidant, curcumin (the yellow and orange components in turmeric) is able to neutralize free radicals. This is important to athletes as it may decrease painful joint inflammation.

## **Olive oil**

Olive oil contains monounsaturated fats which may help lower blood cholesterol. Its antioxidants may help protect against some cancers. Among the extensive list of phytonutrients, no single category of nutrients is more important than its polyphenols.

## **Salmon**

Salmon is a premiere source of omega-3 fatty acids. Due to the eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), found in some fish, eating two servings of fish per week may help to reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer, also minimize symptoms of arthritis and inflammatory diseases, as well as contribute to healthy skin and hair, and alleviate depression.

## **Power Foods for a Healthy Belly**

### **Ginger**

Traditionally ginger has been considered a power food due to its ability to alleviate symptoms of gastrointestinal distress. Ginger contains anti-inflammatory compounds called gingerols. These substances are believed to explain why some athletes (and arthritis patients) may experience reductions in their pain levels as well as improvements in their mobility. Ginger is considered a power food for many

athletes because it can help promote sweating, which is often helpful to assist in much needed detoxification.

### **Greek Yogurt**

Greek yogurt, is an excellent source of calcium, protein and "friendly bacteria". Probiotics can help boost the immune system and aid in digestion. There is increasing evidence that calcium may be a prime belly-buster and assistant in weight loss. A University of Tennessee study found that dieters who consumed between 1,200 and 1,300 milligrams of calcium a day lost nearly twice as much weight as those taking in less calcium. Good news for pre-season training.

### **About the Author**



### **Chrissy Wellington Garner**

Chrissy Wellington Garner is a former Division I athlete. She tries to encourage all readers to balance a busy schedule with a healthy lifestyle! She is the co-author of *Navigating the Supermarket: A Nutritious Guide to Shopping Well.* To learn more about Chrissy follow her on Facebook.