

# VitaMin

Vital health information in a minute



## ALL ABOUT ANTIOXIDANTS

You've probably heard that antioxidants can help support your immune system and fight disease. That's a good thing, because your body's cells have to defend against numerous threats every day. Those threats might be from viruses, infections or damage caused by free radicals.

**Free radicals** are unstable molecules that break down healthy tissue and harm cells. When free radicals attack healthy cells, your body's defense systems may become weakened. Some scientists believe that damage from free radicals may be linked with heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers.<sup>1</sup>

*Where do free radicals come from?* Your body naturally produces free radicals every day. This happens all the time when you're breathing or turning food into energy. Free radicals can also enter your body from

environmental toxins (tobacco smoke or pollution), ultraviolet rays from the sun and substances found in processed food.<sup>1</sup>

**Antioxidants** are natural compounds in foods that may help protect healthy cells against free radicals.<sup>2</sup> Colorful fruits and vegetables are the best sources of antioxidants. Whole grains, nuts and seeds are also good sources. Each antioxidant has unique benefits, so it's smart to eat a variety of foods with antioxidants. Here are a few of the most common:

Antioxidant	What it does	Where to find it
Beta-carotene	May protect against free radicals	Brightly colored fruits and vegetables
Lutein	May help eye health and brain function	Green leafy vegetables
Lycopene	May protect against free radicals	Pink and red fruits and vegetables
Vitamin C	May strengthen the immune system	Most fruits and vegetables
Vitamin E	May help the body fight infections	Nuts, seeds, spinach and kale

*Are supplements safe?* Antioxidant supplements do not have the same benefits as eating antioxidant-rich foods. In fact, taking large doses of antioxidants can do more harm than good for your body.<sup>1</sup> If you're considering taking supplements, talk with your doctor first.

### Sources:

1. American Academy of Family Physicians. "Antioxidants: What You Need to Know." <https://familydoctor.org/antioxidants-what-you-need-to-know/> (last reviewed/updated February 15, 2017).
2. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "Antioxidants – Protecting Healthy Cells." <https://www.eatright.org/food/vitamins-and-supplements/types-of-vitamins-and-nutrients/antioxidants-protecting-healthy-cells> (last reviewed/updated February 23, 2018).

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