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Mushrooms Make a Difference

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White button mushrooms protect against breast and prostate cancer.



Mushrooms boost the immune system.

Mushrooms Make a Difference

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

If you are one of those who enjoy going into the woods to pick your own mushrooms, be careful what you collect as identifying safe mushrooms can be a challenge. While there are more than 14,000 mushroom varieties, only about 3,000 are edible; about 700 have known medicinal properties, and less than one percent are poisonous. Most mushrooms sold in supermarkets are commercially grown on mushroom farms.

Mushrooms can impart their own flavor to food or take on the flavor of other ingredients. Their flavor normally intensifies during cooking. It is popular to add mushrooms to soups, salads, casseroles and sandwiches. Today, mushroom extracts are increasingly being added to food supplements and sports drinks.

While mushrooms are commonly thought to have little nutritional value, they are actually rich in fiber (eight to ten percent of their dry weight) and are a good source of a number of B vitamins and minerals, such as copper. Mushrooms are ideal for persons who want to lose weight or lower their blood pressure, since they contain about 80 to 90 percent water, are very low in calories and have very little sodium and fat.

Mushrooms are an excellent source of potassium, a mineral that helps lower elevated blood pressure and reduces the risk of stroke. Mushrooms are a rich source of selenium, an antioxidant that protects cells from the damaging effects of free radicals. Male health professionals who consumed twice the recommended daily intake of selenium cut their risk of prostate cancer by 65 percent.

Mushrooms have been used by the Chinese for thousands of years both as a health food and for medicinal

purposes. Recently, researchers in Japan have studied the medicinal effects of mushrooms on the immune system, cancer, blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

The most commonly consumed mushroom in the United States is *Agaricus bisporus* or the white button mushroom. Two closely related forms are Crimini mushrooms with a more earthy flavor and firmer texture, and Portabella mushrooms with a meaty flavor. All three mushrooms possess anti-cancer substances. White button mushrooms were recently shown to reduce the risk of breast and prostate cancer. An extract of white button mushrooms decreased cell proliferation and tumor size in a dose-dependent manner.

Many health food stores are now selling Shiitake, Maitake and Reishi mushrooms. Shiitake mushrooms have been used for centuries by the Chinese to treat colds and flu. Lentinan isolated from Shiitake mushrooms helps fight infections and demonstrates anti-tumor activity. An extract of Maitake mushrooms boosts the immune system and activates white blood cells and interleukins that inhibit the growth of breast and liver tumors, while Reishi mushrooms also improve immune function and suppress the growth of highly invasive breast and prostate cancer cells.



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