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6 foods that can help save your skin from sun damage

Just as an unhealthy diet can have a negative effect on your skin and health, a healthy diet high in antioxidant-rich foods can help protect your body, even from the sun. Since antioxidants help reduce inflammation and free radicals, loading your diet with them will go a long way against sunburn and skin damage as a result of UV rays.

Dr. Nicholas Sieveking is a Nashville, TN board certified plastic surgeon and the director of Ageless Solutions, a comprehensive anti-aging and wellness center.

To be clear, Dr. Sieveking is not saying you should completely replace your daily sunscreen with food, but what you eat can offer additional protection for your skin. So if you're looking for some ingestible sun protection, add these six sun-friendly foods to your next shopping list.

1. Berries & stone fruits

Strawberries, blueberries and cherries contain high levels of vitamin C, which can reduce free radical damage caused by exposure to UV radiation. Vitamin C also stimulates collagen production, important for skin's youthful appearance. As a bonus, cherries contain melatonin, which protects skin from UV radiation and repairs sunburn damage.

2. Leafy greens

If it's green and it's got leaves, chances are it's good for sun protection. According to one study, spinach, kale and swiss chard can reduce the risk of squamous cell skin cancer by 50%. Broccoli is also a good choice: it's full of sulphoraphane, an antioxidant that helps your cells protect themselves against UV radiation.

Fresh herbs like parsley, basil, sage and rosemary are also packed with free radical-fighting, skin-protecting antioxidants. Not sure where to start? Check out our guide to cruciferous vegetables.

3. Red & orange produce

The antioxidant lycopene has been shown to protect the skin against sunburn and is at least twice as effective an antioxidant as betacarotene when it comes to blocking UV light. It also helps rid the body of free radicals. Chow down on tomatoes, papaya, guava, red bell peppers and pink grapefruit. Watermelon is an especially good choice: it contains 40% more lycopene than tomatoes.

Betacarotene is another antioxidant that has natural sunscreen properties: it's been linked to reduced reactions to sunburns. You can find it in carrots, sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkins, mango and apricots.

4. Micro-algae

Spirulina has been dubbed "the next great superfood," and for good reason. This micro-algae — along with chlorella — contains the antioxidant astaxanthin, which has been shown to protect the skin and eyes against UV radiation. It also fights free radicals and inflammation to prevent sun damage by preventing UV-induced cell damage.

If micro-algae isn't exactly your cup of tea, you can find this powerful antioxidant in shrimp and salmon.

5. Chocolate

As long as it's dark chocolate you're eating, you'll be ingesting plenty of flavanoids, which can improve your skin's ability protect against sun burns and other UV-induced issues.

Research found that people who ate about one ounce of high-percentage dark chocolate every day for three months could withstand twice the amount of UVB rays before their skin started to turn red, compared to those who didn't.

6. Green & black tea

The myriad health benefits of tea are well-known, but it's nice to know that the cups you're drinking can also help protect against sun damage. Green and black teas are packed with polyphenols that can help stop cancer development by limiting the blood supply to the cancerous area.

Green tea can even help prevent non-melanoma skin cancer by enhancing DNA repair.

Bon appétit!

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Dr. Nicholas Sieveking is a board certified plastic surgeon who completed his training in General Surgery and Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Stanford University. After Stanford, he received additional fellowship training in Aesthetic Surgery in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil. In addition to his plastic surgery board certification, Dr. Sieveking is also board certified with advanced fellowship training in Anti-Aging and Functional Medicine. This double board certification enables Dr. Sieveking to be the most complete anti-aging surgeon and physician to treat his patient's age-related needs, from the inside to the outside. Dr. Sieveking's comprehensive solo practice includes advanced cosmetic and reconstructive surgeries, state of the art cosmetic laser and skin care services, Bio-identical hormone replacement therapies, medically-supervised weight loss programs, and cutting edge laboratory testing for hormone, amino acid, vitamin and nutrient deficiencies as well as toxin analysis and food and chemical sensitivities testing.

Dr. Sieveking has operated and lectured around the world on topics of face lifts, breast surgery, and cleft lip and palate repair. He has authored a chapter on Rhinoplasty in one of the major training textbooks for plastic surgery residents. In 2012 and 2013, he was voted "Top Plastic Surgeon in Nashville" in two Readers Polls by the citizens of Nashville.