

Culture

ABC of antioxidants

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Mention antioxidants and chances are that most of you would know what they are and how they contribute to your overall health. Often, you get to hear in TV commercials or at a doctor's clinic that antioxidants are essential for your health and youthfulness, and certain ingredients containing antioxidants in facial creams ensure good skin too.

In layman's term, antioxidants are substances that protect your cells against the effects of free radicals –molecules produced when your body breaks down food or is exposed to tobacco smoke and radiation. Free radicals may play a role in heart disease, cancer and other diseases.

Kanchan Naikawadi, preventive healthcare specialist and found-director, Indus Health Plus, says, "Our body is made up of millions of cells. These cells face threats every day from various external environmental stresses. These stresses trigger generation of free radicals, which are highly reactive atomic species. Some cells have the capability to heal from the damage, while others do not. Scientists believe free radicals can contribute to the ageing process of our body. Antioxidants are chemicals that help in stopping or limiting these damages caused by free radicals. Our body uses antioxidants to balance free radicals which prevent them from causing damage to other cells. When you exercise, or your body converts food into energy, free radicals are released causing oxidative stress in cells that leads to cell damage."

There are several antioxidant systems within the body that help cope with the oxidative stress that results from regular metabolic processes. Additionally, environmental components like cigarette smoke, alcohol, processed food, air

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pollution, and harmful radiation of sunlight exposes the body to free radicals. “Antioxidants counterattack oxidative stress in certain medical conditions like cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, cataract and age related macular degeneration. Lack of antioxidants can result in ill consequences due to routine metabolic process of body,” she warns.

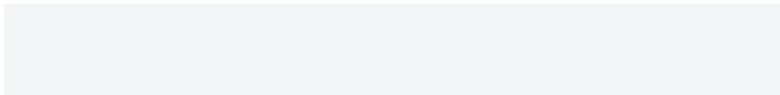
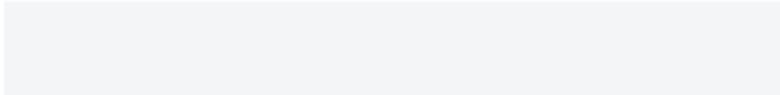
Each antioxidant has a different chemical make-up and provides different health benefits. Intake of too much of one antioxidant can become harmful. Therefore, one needs to consult a doctor before changing the diet or taking supplements. “There is no specific age to start consumption of antioxidants, but the best way is to take a genetic test and then personalise your nutrition plan in accordance with your genetic report, after consulting the dietician,” she adds.

Should the consumption of antioxidants be different for men and women? Naikawadi says that consumption of antioxidants may vary from men to women depending upon factors like age, diet, weight, physical activity or any pre-existing medical condition. “Follow a healthy diet that comprises a variety of fruits, green leafy vegetables, spices, herbs, pulses and nuts. Individuals with a non-vegetarian diet should include green leafy vegetables and fruits in routine consumption to improve their antioxidant level. Do not take antioxidant supplements until prescribed by your physician,” she advises.

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