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## Making judgments about food

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By John Signorino  
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Nuts, avocados, dairy products and eggs have all been given a bad reputation in recent years. The result? By focusing on a single component of these foods – fat, cholesterol, etc. – people are missing out on the very important, real and numerous health benefits these foods provide. Rather than this single-nutrient focus, consumers need to understand health benefits of whole foods and the complete nutrition profiles they provide.

Take, for example, the avocado. While dieters sometimes shun them as a high-fat, indulgent food, they actually provide 25 essential nutrients, including fiber, potassium, vitamin E, B-vitamins and folic acid – not to mention the “good fat,” which can actually lower levels of LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, contributing to heart health.

Similarly, cholesterol made eggs villains for years, while people ignored the fact that eggs are a rich and affordable protein source. Nuts provide powerful cardiovascular benefits, derived from a nutrition profile that includes omega-3 fatty acids. Even so, people's fat fears steered them clear of this heart-healthy food for too long. Also a victim of the fat phobia are dairy products, which – as people often overlook – come in a variety of choices, including calcium-, vitamin-D- and potassium-rich, low-fat and nonfat varieties.

Adding to the list of misunderstood foods is seafood. A recent Union-Tribune article – “Eating Fish: There's a Catch” – asked a question that many Americans, sparked by misleading mercury concerns, have considered, “Should everyone eat the canned tuna?” But the question people should be asking when it comes to canned and other seafood – what are the risks if I don't eat fish? In other words, what are the whole-health benefits derived from seafood?

Seafood, particularly salmon and tuna – low in saturated fat, cholesterol and calories, and high in lean protein – has long been recognized as a great source of omega-3 fatty acids, which research has connected to a variety of health benefits, most noticeably heart health. The American Heart Association and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans say consumers should “eat at least two servings of fish each week” – and they are not alone. The Journal of the American Medical Association states eating fish cuts the risk of death from coronary disease – the single largest killer of Americans, according to the AHA – by 36 percent. In addition, the American Diabetes Association has noted as many as 20 million Americans have diabetes, and foods high in protein and omega-3 are important to counter the ailment's effects. And there is recent research lending support to other health benefits derived from seafood, including the benefits of selenium – found in canned tuna and other fish – that appear to be especially important in the prevention of cancer and as an antioxidant to help the immune system.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of confusion over the health benefits of seafood. There has been far too much discussion of potential negatives and not enough media coverage about actual positive benefits, which have been outlined time and again by credible, third-party organizations and research. Consumers, particularly pregnant women, are often misled about seafood. The sad reality is that, as a result of the confusion, many middle- and lower-income women and their children are missing out on the array of health benefits canned tuna and seafood provide.

A recent study in The Lancet, one of the oldest, peer-reviewed, independent medical journals, found that higher maternal seafood consumption during pregnancy results in children showing better neurological function – including higher IQs – than children whose mothers ate low amounts or no amounts of seafood during pregnancy. This study adds to the growing body of evidence that supports the fact that the real risk comes from not eating seafood.

Two reports issued in October 2006 – “Seafood Choices: Balancing Benefits and Risks,” issued by The Institute of Medicine, and a report by Harvard researchers, which was published in the JAMA – agreed that the benefits of eating fish are significant. These studies lend more credibility to the notion that consumers need to be educated about the benefits of the foods they consume, and they need to look at foods from a whole-health perspective.

By following the government guidelines for fish consumption, everyone – including pregnant women and children – should eat fish.

The public is best served when diet recommendations are made from the perspective of whole foods and the package of nutrients each food offers. In a day and age when two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, and diabetes rates among both adults and children are surging, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, many individuals and families are missing out on benefits of consuming seafood, especially canned tuna and salmon, which are affordable and healthful protein sources.

Consumers need to be educated and informed about their food choices, not frightened by a narrow perspective. This whole-health approach will lead to healthier individuals and families for years to come.

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