

HERO FOODS

Here is my top ten list of essential and nutrient-rich foods that I like to call “hero” foods:

- Whole Grain Pasta
- **Dark Leafy Greens (like Kale and Spinach)**
- Low-Fat Dairy
- **Black Beans**
- **Lemon**
- **Eggs**
- **Avocado**
- Almonds
- **Mushrooms**
- Blueberries

I am going to focus on five of these foods, why they are important from a nutrition standpoint and a few different ways of using them. Try to keep these in the weekly grocery list and integrate with the week’s special buys in meats, produce and unique ingredients.

In the 2010 Dietary Guidelines, the U.S. Department of Agriculture identified the top four “nutrients of concern” – the nutrients in America’s diets, which are most lacking, and linked to public health. The nutrients identified are calcium, vitamin D, potassium and fiber. Another reason that I love this list of food if you have these foods on your grocery list, you know your family will get these critical nutrients.

Dark Leafy Greens – A must have in every meals. First, my favorite is **Kale** – this “wonder-food” of the moment IS really wonderful. It adds fiber, potassium, calcium and magnesium to meals. They are also high in antioxidant vitamins C, A, K and E. For breakfast, add to veggie scrambles with eggs, peppers, low-fat cheese, and fresh tomato. Chop it up and throw it in with pasta or rice for a savory lunch. Toss with olive oil and salt and bake in the oven for 20 minutes at 275°F for crunchy chips. You can basically throw kale –as well as spinach for that matter – into any casserole, macaroni and cheese, and meatballs for added nutrition.

Black Beans – An amazing vegetarian protein that is naturally low in fat and cholesterol. They are also a good source of fiber and several antioxidants, like flavonoids. Have you added black beans to your brownie mix yet? My favorite use is my go-to black bean dip – just take black beans and premade salsa, blend until smooth – serve with corn tortillas or a variety of sliced veggies.

Mushrooms – Mushrooms are a mighty staple that can be used in many meals. The best part is most supermarkets sell sliced and whole button mushrooms, as well as Portobello mushrooms, offering you a wide range of variety in sizes and textures. Chop up your choice of mushrooms and mix with a half-pound of ground turkey or beef. The mushrooms add a meaty flavor (umami), and vitamin D, while cutting out fat and calories. You won't even miss the meat! You can make meatballs for the week to add to pastas; make and freeze burgers; or use as a taco filling.

Lemons and oranges – I always have lemons and oranges on hand as they add a spritz of refreshing flavor and vitamin C to almost anything. Use as a flavor enhancer instead of fat and salt for roasted chicken, seafood, smoothies, even oatmeal. You can slice up and put in water.

Eggs – Eggs provide antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin, and are also a great source of protein, selenium and choline. I always hard boil an entire carton of eggs on a Sunday so I have on hand for the week. Stick in lunchboxes, add to salads, mix into low-fat casseroles or even eat breakfast for dinner! Did I mention that you receive all those power-packed nutrients for only 70 calories per large egg?

Avocados – Avocados are another nutrient-rich food, contributing nearly 20 vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients, including vitamins E and C, folate, fiber, iron, potassium lutein and beta-carotene. And they are not just for guacamole! You can spread on toast and top with feta cheese, or slice and add to sandwiches. My favorite recipe is an avocado mousse. You simply combine avocado, sugar, almond milk and lime juice in a food processor, and then fold in whipped topping. You can serve it in an ice cream dish or waffle cone.