Fueling up with functional foods

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(HealthDay)—Though the term "functional foods" currently has no legal definition, it's more than just a clever marketing catchphrase.

According to health organizations like the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, these are foods that go beyond providing calories and basic nutrition to actually improving your health. They can be whole foods in their natural state or enhanced ones.

But to be considered *functional* there must be research that attests to their benefits when eaten regularly as part of a good diet.

The academy points to three main categories of functional foods. First are everyday foods, such as vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, fish and meat with compounds that provide a higher level of nutrition—think of the probiotics in yogurt and the antioxidants in berries.

Next are foods enriched or fortified with food compounds like omega-3 fatty acids.

And finally are synthesized food ingredients, like prebiotics.

With many functional foods as close as the nearest supermarket, it's easy to add more of them to your diet. For instance, choose fatty fish (think albacore tuna, salmon, herring as a few examples) for dinner—it's a functional food because of its natural omega-3s. The monounsaturated fat in olive oil may reduce the risk of heart disease, so it makes the list, too.

The value of many functional foods lies in their micronutrients, like the polyphenols that give fruits and veggies their rich colors. Research into many of these substances is still in the early stages, but scientists have already identified more than 8,000 "phyto" or *plant*-based chemicals.

Most fruits and vegetables have numerous ones, but research has yet to unravel what specific combinations make them so good for you. So, until researchers learn more, eat fruits and vegetables in every color of the

rainbow to get the widest array of nutrients.

   More information: The website Fruits and Veggies: More Matters has more on phytonutrients and how they boost health.

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