

Functional foods for healthy aging

by Alison Duncan, PhD, RD

Foods that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition are considered ‘functional’ foods. They contain ingredients that aren’t essential for growth and development, but promote optimal health.

My name is Dr. Alison Duncan, and I’m a Professor in Nutritional Science at the University of Guelph. We all know how important nutrition is for our health as we get older. Our risk for many chronic diseases increases, but functional foods can help reduce that risk.

Examples of functional foods

- Blueberries are a natural source of antioxidants, which help to prevent cancer.
- Cereal with added dietary fibre keep the bowels healthy.
- Eggs with the omega-3 fatty acids DHA and EPA are good for heart health.

New functional foods emerge from research

I focus much of my research on functional foods and their health benefits. Some of these foods are so new, they aren’t even on the market yet! For instance there’s a new spearmint tea for osteoarthritis, and soy muffins for improved heart health.

I’m part of a research team looking at bagels that are high in resistant starch. Resistant starch is a type of dietary fibre that reduces the risk of diabetes. The “Better Bagel Study” has shown that eating bagels high in resistant starch can improve how our bodies manage blood sugar.

These bagels haven’t hit the shelves yet. But you can combat diabetes with other functional foods that are high in dietary fibre:

- Breakfast cereal: Look for breakfast cereals with at least 4 grams of dietary fibre in each serving.
- Oatmeal: Still one of the best ways to start the day. For added functional



food punch, mix in some blueberries, cinnamon, and walnuts!

- Whole grain bread: Choose breads made from whole grains for the most nutrition.

Want to learn more about functional foods?

I’m part of a nutrition research group called Agri-food for Healthy Aging. This is part of the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging. If you’d like to learn more about research exploring functional foods for healthy aging visit the [A-HA website](#). You’ll also find a Functional Foods for Healthy Aging Toolkit and fact sheets on common functional food ingredients, such as omega-3 fatty acids, plant sterols, and dietary fibre.

About the Author

Alison Duncan, Ph.D., R.D. is a Professor and Associate Director of Research at the Human Nutraceutical Research Unit in the Department of Human Health and Nutritional Sciences at the University of Guelph.