

LIFESTYLE

There's nothing fishy about eating seaweed — it can protect against heart disease and even help you lose weight, says SUSAN CLARK

If you've ever given it a passing thought, you would probably associate edible seaweed with sushi.

But there is more to sea greens, as they are properly known, than just being the latest addition to trendy restaurant menus. As well as making other foods more tasty, they have incredible health properties and can help you win the battle of the bulge.

It's no coincidence that sea greens comprise 10% of the diet in Japan, where the incidence of many cancers and obesity is the lowest of all developed countries. What makes sea greens so potent and deserving of that overused label "superfood" is that they contain more iodine than any other natural food. Iodine is needed by the thyroid to produce the hormone thyroxine, which stimulates the nervous system and affects the rate of oxidation in the cells. It controls the metabolism and helps the body turn protein, fats and carbohydrates into energy.

Insufficient iodine will affect the body's ability to produce energy, both for activities and for the internal maintenance of its cells and tissues. In other words, you will feel well below par. But just one square inch of a sea green such as kombu or wakame is enough to meet the adult body's normal daily requirement of the mineral.

All sea greens are some form of algae or seaweed — kombu, for example, is a member of the yellow- or brown-coloured kelp family, which are the longest-living and largest of all sea plants.

Eating sea greens can rebalance hormones, reduce bloating and water retention and lower high blood-cholesterol levels, which means they can also protect against heart problems. Kombu is made up of 44% slow-release carbohydrates, which help stabilise blood sugars, so it is a good nutritional choice for those who suffer from polycystic ovary syndrome or have diabetes, where there is an inability to metabolise insulin properly. With a 6.5% protein content and 1% fat, kombu is a good choice for ➤➤➤

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KELP IS ON THE WAY



1 NORI

Maintains skin health and can reduce phlegm, lower cholesterol and is easily digested. Rich in fibre, low in fat; use in salads, soups and for making sushi. It contains more vitamin C than oranges and is delicious roasted. Known as sloke in Ireland and laver in Wales.

2 AGAR-AGAR

Produced from several species of sea greens and usually sold as a powder or as flakes. A good substitute for animal gelatin to make jellies. Rich source of vitamins, minerals and iodine, it adds bulk to meals without increasing calories, and so helps to curb appetite.

3 WAKAME

Promotes healthy hair, nails and skin. Traditionally used in Japan to purify the blood after childbirth. Supports the liver and has a sweet flavour. Has anti-cancer properties and is higher in calcium than most sea greens. Soak for five minutes, then cook for 45 minutes.

4 HIJIKI

Promotes glossy, healthy hair and prevents its loss. Can help reduce wrinkles and assist a clear complexion. It expands in the stomach and helps other foods to digest.

5 KOMBU

Unlocks the nutritional value of the foods prepared with it. Used to treat arthritis, rheumatism, high blood pressure, thrush, prostate and ovarian problems, lymphatic swellings and water retention. Also good for weight loss. Soak for 20-30 minutes or allow 1hr cooking time. Use two strips to tenderise beans and reduce flatulence.

6 DULSE

It has the highest iron content of any food and so is excellent for those with anaemia. Prevents seasickness, inhibits the herpes virus and is a good salt substitute. It has a salty flavour and is rich in iodine and manganese.

KELP IS ON ITS WAY

➤➤➤ vegetarians and those trying to lose weight, and because it's packed with dietary fibre, it can also help those suffering from a range of digestive disorders, including irritable bowel syndrome. Sea greens are also a good source of vitamin B12, which is used to make red blood cells, which long-term vegetarians often lack, since meat is the usual dietary source of this nutrient. Some varieties also contain 10 times more calcium than milk.

They also cleanse the intestinal tract and, because of their high mineral content, work in the body to create

a more alkaline environment, which naturopaths believe helps keep the blood purified.

Understanding that sea greens are packed with goodness is one thing, knowing what to do with them in your kitchen is another.

The first hurdle is finding out where to buy them. Most health-food stores stock them. If you are having difficulty, call the mail-order suppliers Clearspring Direct on 020 8746 0152.

Having got your sea greens, you need to know how to cook them. Here, you should take your cue from Japanese cooking, where kombu, for example, is widely used as a seasoning to enhance the taste of other vegetable dishes. It is an

outstanding source of a flavouring substance called monosodium glutamic acid, the natural, safe version of the chemical flavour-enhancer monosodium glutamate. Contrary to popular belief, sea greens will not make food taste fishy — instead, they simply enhance the flavour of stews, beans, pastas, grains, soups, fish dishes and salads.

Experiment with everyday recipes, such as adding kombu to French onion soup. For more ideas, see *Living Foods for Health* by Dr Gillian McKeith (Piatkus £6.99) or *The Sunday Times Vitality Cookbook* (HarperCollins £19.99). It takes only a little imagination to bring a whole new meaning to the phrase "eat your greens".