**Five Super Foods For Dancers**

By Emily C. Harrison MS, RD, LD

It’s no accident that all five of these top foods are fruits and vegetables. The more colorful your dietary choices the better you will look, feel, and dance.   Fruits and veggies are a storehouse of vitamins, minerals and compounds called phytonutrients that all work synergistically to promote health and aid in sports recovery.  You can’t get the same effect from a pill.  As a dietitian who works with elite level dancers, I could simplify my recommendations with two statements: Don’t ever skip breakfast and eat more fruits and vegetables.  Below I have highlighted five super foods that all dancers need to try.

**Kale** has earned its name as a super food because it beats out other vegetables with its high amount of lutein, beta-carotene, vitamin K, calcium, iron, folate and vitamin C.  It’s packed with cancer fighting phytonutrients.  Enjoy this versatile green in salads and soups, or simply sautéed with veggie broth and garlic. Impress your friends by baking it in the oven for tasty kale chips that everyone will love.  Take washed kale, strip off the stems and combine with peaches, olive oil, lemon juice, honey, salt and pepper. Massage the dressing into the kale and peaches for an amazing salad that looks and tastes beautiful (it’s great with dried cranberries too).

**Apples** Everyone knows this delicious and portable fruit is perfect for fall breakfasts like oatmeal and oatcakes, but it also makes an easy snack especially with nut butter.  Apples are low in calories (about 60-80) but high in fiber, vitamin C, and antioxidants that can help prevent cancer and protect against heart disease.  The dark red skins of apples and grapes contain polyphenols that have been shown to have a protective effect against oxidative stress.  Dancers and other athletes who push their bodies hard for hours at a time create more oxidative stress on the body. This can affect recovery, which can affect performance the next day. The more anti-oxidants you eat from colorful fruits and veggies, the better you will recover during a long week of shows or rehearsals.

**Broccoli** This veggie favorite is easy to lightly steam on weeknights when you don’t have much time to make dinner. Or throw some in a wrap for a big lunch time nutrient boost. Broccoli is considered a super food because of its high levels of vitamins, minerals, and sulfur-containing phytonutrients. Did you know that the stems are rich in calcium, and some research suggests that if you chop broccoli and let it sit for a few minutes before cooking, you can enhance an enzyme that converts the healthy compounds to their more active form?

**Carrots** All orange and yellow veggies and fruits are packed with beta-carotene, a type of vitamin A.  They’re good for your skin and eyes.  People who get plenty of vitamin A have been shown to have fewer infections and stronger immune systems.  Dancers can’t afford a sick day, so eating foods rich in vitamin A and C can help keep illness at bay.  Taking high supplemental doses of either of those vitamins can be detrimental. But nature provides just the right amount in real foods.   Carrots are the perfect addition to lunches because this root veggie can stay fresh longer.

**Blueberries** are packed with cancer fighting, immune boosting anthocyanins (a type of flavonoid). That’s just a fancy word for what gives them their rich dark color. The more colorful your plate the better!  Having trouble remembering that ballet you learned last year?  Flavonoid-rich foods like blueberries have been shown to enhance spatial memory. Another study linked blueberries to faster rates of learning. Fresh or frozen, they taste great in a smoothie or over oatmeal.

Dancers should aim for at least 4 servings of vegetables a day and 2-3 servings of fruit.  Try to eat a rainbow of fruits and veggies each day, and don’t be afraid to bring something new home from the store that you have never tried before.