

Book Review

Goldberg G, ed. *Plants: Diet and Health*. British Nutrition Foundation Task Force Report. Oxford: British Nutrition Foundation/Blackwell, 2003. £49.00, paperback, 368 pp. ISBN 0 632 05962 1.

If you are interested in this topic get a copy of this book! There is something in it for everyone. I have taken longer to review it than I meant to because it was so fascinating I wanted to read every word. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive review of the topic with lots of detail. Each chapter concludes with a helpful summary and key points. The book is the product of a British Nutrition Foundation Task Force, which reviewed information concerning bioactive substances in foods that are not usually considered as nutrients, linking this to the promotion of good health and protection against chronic disease.

The book begins with a clear introduction and background to the topic. The chapter on secondary plant products is useful but inevitably broad-brush, given the huge number of compounds. For example, there are more than 25 000 terpenoids, many of which have recognised medicinal effects. The methodology of epidemiological studies linking plant foods to health is considered, along with issues of measurement error. This leads on to a consideration of the potential mechanisms of action of these plant-based compounds, with a focus on cancer and heart disease. The role of gut microflora is considered in some detail, including the influence on colonic microflora of plant-based foods and also of probiotic foods, which have been designed to increase levels of potentially beneficial bacteria in the colon. This chapter also covers the role of Brassica vegetables as promising anti-carcinogenic agents. Dietary intake and bioavailability of the various bioactive compounds are discussed with the conclusion that there is a need for a thorough survey of the occurrence of these chemicals in foods and their progress through the body. Subsequent chapters then discuss in detail compounds found in

different food groups: fruit and vegetables; cereals, nuts and pulses; plant-derived lipids; and miscellaneous foods including chocolate, herbs and spices. These chapters on foods are rounded off by a chapter discussing the impact of processing and cooking on the bioactive substances in food, although knowledge in this area is still limited.

The final chapters of the book deal with public health recommendations for increasing plant foods, conclusions and recommendations of the Task Force. Current interventions to promote fruit and vegetable consumption in the USA and the UK are reviewed. Recommendations focus on priorities for future research; for example, the need to know more about the bioavailability of these plant compounds and which compounds contribute to the health effects to allow health promotion messages to be sharpened. The last chapter aims to provide a 'flavour' of the report in terms of common questions and answers. For example, the question 'Are vegetarians healthier than people who consume meat?' is tackled.

I liked this book. It is clearly written and contains lots of relevant information for academics, health professionals, the food industry and policy-makers. In addition to all the useful facts there were little gems of wonderful detail – for example on page 36 I learnt that lack of tolerance to tannins may be one reason for the demise of the red squirrel. If you want to know why you will have to read the book!

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