

JOEL FUHRMAN, MD

Set your sights on carrots, greens

As a child, you probably heard that carrots are good for your eyes. This may be because carrots (and other orange and yellow vegetables and fruits) are abundant in beta-carotene — a provitamin A carotenoid,

meaning it is converted to vitamin A in the body. Vitamin A is important for eye health, especially for night vision as it helps to produce a pigment called rhodopsin in the retina, which helps the eye

detect low levels of light and allows us to see at night. As such, vitamin A deficiency is known to cause night blindness.

However, beta-carotene is not the only carotenoid that contributes to healthy vision. Out of about 600 known carotenoids, 20 have been found circulating in human blood and only two are found in the eye. They are lutein and zeaxanthin, which cannot be synthesized by the body and are primarily found in green leafy vegetables.

Once consumed, these two carotenoids accumulate in the macula, the inner portion of the retina, which has a high concentration of photoreceptor (or light receptor) cells. The typical amount of lutein and zeaxanthin in the macula (called "macular pigment") is quite

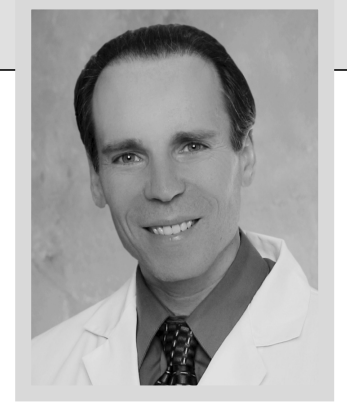
low among Americans, due to low intake of leafy greens.

The retina is the most metabolically active tissue in the body, and lutein and zeaxanthin provide antioxidant protection. Furthermore, macular pigment reduces glare and enhances contrast and visual acuity, and acts as a filter to protect the macula from blue light damage.

Blue light is a part of visible light (and sunlight). Electronic devices and energy-efficient lighting increase our exposure to it, especially in the evenings.

The idea that leafy greens benefit vision began to gain momentum about 20 years ago in research on age-related macular degeneration (AMD), a disease in which the photoreceptors in the macula are progressively damaged or lost, causing impaired vision.

AMD is the leading cause of



blindness worldwide.

In 1994, a study on AMD found that higher total carotenoid intake was associated with lower risk of the disease, and lutein and zeaxanthin were the specific carotenoids most strongly associated with decreased risk.

When looking at foods, higher intake of spinach and collard greens (rich sources of lutein and zeaxanthin) were also associated with decreased risk.

More studies followed, many reporting that higher lutein and zeaxanthin intake was linked to lower AMD risk.

Supplementation trials in AMD patients also reported increases in macular pigment (more lutein and zeaxanthin in the macula) and improvement in visual performance.

These results sparked the marketing of eye health supplements containing lutein and zeaxanthin. However, previous findings on isolated carotenoid supplements should urge us to be cautious; several trials of beta-carotene supplements have reported an increased risk of lung cancer, cardiovascular disease or overall mortality.

This is an unacceptable risk for a nutrient we can easily get from foods, which have no risk.

These nutritional benefits are also enhanced by accompanying phytonutrients in green vegetables that have further benefits to the entire body.

The typical American diet is dangerously low in leafy greens, and the average adult's intake of lutein + zeaxanthin from foods is a meager 1.5 mg per day.

Just a single cup of cooked spinach or kale contains more than 20 mg of lutein + zeaxanthin, and collards more than 14 mg; commercial vision supplements commonly contain 10-20 mg of lutein plus 2 mg or less zeaxanthin.

A healthful diet actually supplies more of these beneficial nutrients for the eye than supplements do.

Of course leafy greens have several advantages over supplements, with a huge variety of additional carotenoids and other beneficial nutrients with no risk of excess.

Dr. Fuhrman is a board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. Visit his website at DrFuhrman.com, or submit questions and comments to newsquestions@drfuhrman.com.

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Master Gardener to tackle weeds Wednesday

The Florence Garden Club will welcome the autumn season at its October program and meeting.

The public is invited to hear special guest speaker and gardener Pat Patterson. While her 39 years as a Master Gardener is an achievement, it's her attitude towards gardening that sparks this presentation. Patterson is eager to share her knowledge with the community regarding weeds.

Her presentation will help gardeners identify them as well as use them for food and medicine.

Don't miss this free presentation of "Weeds and Wildings" on Wednesday, Oct. 14, beginning at 1 p.m., at the Presbyterian Church, 3996 Highway 101.

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