

Superfoods Or Superfads? Dr. David Seres Weighs In



By Josh Bloom — September 13, 2018



Mmmm! Delicious. Original Photo:
Breaking Muscle [1]

If you do a Google search of "Oz superfoods" you will get more than 40,000 hits. The good doctor really likes superfoods. One small problem - there is no such thing, his self-serving proclamations notwithstanding.

A really good doctor, David Seres, the Director of Medical Nutrition at Columbia University Medical Center, and also an expert advisor for the American Council, has a few qualities that Dr. Oz lacks:

- Expertise
- Ethics
- Credibility

In his [recent piece](#) [2] in The Hill Seres takes apart the superfood myth, both scientifically and economically.

Now, more than ever, it's easy to find high-price, locally grown, organic produce alongside "superfoods" like pomegranate juice, acai berries and chia seeds. Toss it all together into a sleek \$400 blender and you've got the cure for whatever ails, except for credit card debt.

David Seres, M.D.

SUPERFOODS - A FALSE PREMISE

One problem with the superfood concept is that it overshadows and, to some extent, trivializes information about healthy diets that is already known. It is no secret that [diets that are rich in fruits and vegetables are healthy](#) [3]. But the superfood myth is designed to obscure this fact by implying that scattered around the fruit and vegetable universe are magical food "elixirs." You've seen them all - acai, quinoa, goji berries, kale chips **(1)** etc.

But these foods are marketed for wealthy (and gullible) people. Seres writes:

Superfoods are certainly within reach for upper middle class urbanites folks. They often live near cities and can get an antioxidant probiotic rich \$12 kumquat or lemon cucumber smoothies in one of a dozen trendy bars.

THE ANTIOXIDANT AND PROBIOTIC MYTHS

Good luck finding a "superfood" that doesn't claim to be either an antioxidant or probiotic. But do you really want either? Seres is emphatic about antioxidants (emphasis mine) **(2)**.

*"The assumption that taking antioxidants is healthful, or even safe, is based on the kind of faulty logic that would lead you to similarly conclude that you should stop breathing. After all, there is a strong correlation between how many times you've taken a breath and how likely you are to die. **Oxidative stress does cause damage when unchecked, but it is also one of the body's most important defenses against pathogens like bacteria, and is an important signal to other defense mechanisms to ramp up their activity when there is something amiss. So it should be no surprise that proper research has shown that antioxidant supplementation can cause real harm, such as an increase in cancer.**"*

And the "probiotic train" may be running off the rails, according to two recent papers **(3,4)** in the journal *Cell* (See [Are Probiotics Nootropics?](#) [4]). One of the papers reports that probiotics colonize the intestines in some people but not others. The other reports something worse - that people who took probiotics to restore their normal gut biome had the opposite occur. Participants who took no probiotics had their normal intestinal flora return within a few days after stopping the antibiotics. But for those who took probiotics, this took months.

THE RICH BUY UNNECESSARY FAD FOODS WHILE THE POOR CAN'T AFFORD A HEALTHY DIET

Perhaps one of Seres' biggest concerns is that while wealthy people buy foods that are unnecessary, poor people can't even afford a healthy diet:

The more our society uplifts the consumption of high-end foods available only to the few, the more it reinforces the assumption held by the many that healthy food is too expensive. As we exalt the amount of antioxidants in beet green pesto, we widen the gulf between those who have much and those who haven't been exposed to or can't access or afford broccoli.

So, it is fair to say that there is either no such thing as a superfood, or that we are surrounded by them, depending on how you use the term:

Everything in the produce aisle is a superfood, the rest is just window dressing. We need to start there and insure everyone has access to these, the basics of a healthful diet.

If you're looking for wisdom, common sense, and an unbiased opinion it should be quite clear which doctor you should be paying attention to.

NOTES:

(1) Kale is evil. I believe that this will be validated in history books.

(2) Private communication, 8/6/18

(3) "Personalized Gut Mucosal Colonization Resistance to Empiric Probiotics Is Associated with Unique Host and Microbiome Features" [VOLUME 174, ISSUE 6](#) [5], P1388-1405.E21, September 06, 2018

(4) "Post-Antibiotic Gut Mucosal Microbiome Reconstitution Is Impaired by Probiotics and Improved by Autologous FMT" [VOLUME 174, ISSUE 6](#) [5], P1406-1423.E16, September 06, 2018

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Links

[1] <https://breakingmuscle.com/healthy-eating/top-10-supermarket-superfoods>

[2] <http://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/405865-healthy-food-has-gone-high-end-but-is-the-lifestyle-trend-worth-the-cost>

[3] <https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/introduction/nutrition-and-health-are-closely-related/>

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/09/12/are-probiotics-nobiotics-13392>

[5] [https://www.cell.com/cell/issue?pii=S0092-8674\(17\)X0019-6](https://www.cell.com/cell/issue?pii=S0092-8674(17)X0019-6)