Foods Rich in Lutein Make your Eyes Healthier

By Kim Larson, HeraldNet

Last week I attended the annual Food and Nutrition Conference Expo for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, a national organization of more than 75,000 registered dietitian nutritionists. This annual conference showcases cutting-edge science in food, nutrition and health. I'd like to share what I learned from a presentation on lutein.

Luteins are phytochemicals in the carotenoid family of nutrients. Levels of these nutrients in the eye are correlated to macular pigment density in the human retina, as well as to levels found in the brain. Lutein affects our visual health by slowing down macular degeneration as we age — called age-related macular degeneration. It's also related to brain health and cognitive performance in older adults.

Testing your macular pigment optical density is a non-invasive, quick and easy test. I was interested to know my eye levels of these nutrients, so when they offered the test I said yes! My results showed high levels of both. I feel confident that I am getting these important nutrients to protect my eye and brain health. Ask your eye doctor about this test if you'd like to know yours.

Which foods contain lutein? Look for the hallmark carotenoid colors: bright red, yellow and orange foods, along with dark, leafy greens. Think peppers, squash, broccoli, brussel sprouts, carrots, sweet potatoes, kale, spinach, chard, etc.

Some foods that aren't high in lutein may contribute even more of it because the lutein is absorbed better than in plants. This inherent quality comes from combining the carotenoid with a healthy fat, which increases absorption. Avocados, nuts, seeds and eggs are examples of this, because their relatively low-lutein content is more bioavailable than much of what is found in plant sources, according to one study. Cooking and chopping these foods also promotes higher absorption.

There's no recommended daily allowance for lutein, but it's possible we could see it in the future if more human studies show its benefits. Current published studies suggest there are eye-health benefits when we eat more than 6 milligrams of dietary lutein per day. According to a national survey of what we eat (National Health & Nutrition Examination data 2003-2004, published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association 2010) most of us get fewer than 2 milligrams per day. That's far below what we need to see positive effects on eye health and disease prevention.

As a guide, use the recommended daily servings from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and you'll hit the 6-10 milligrams of lutein a day with a variety of foods and with little effort. That's around five to eight servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Maintaining a healthy weight, normal blood pressure and lowering LDL or "bad" cholesterol levels also play an important role in increasing macular pigment.

For a list of lutein-rich foods, go to lpi.oregonstate.edu/mic/dietary-factors/phytochemicals/carotenoids.

Disclaimer: This is for information only and not intended as personal medical advice.