

Chapter 1

Nourishing Your Body with Superfoods

In This Chapter

- ▶ Reviewing the basics of nutrition
 - ▶ Fitting superfoods into the food pyramid
 - ▶ Getting started on a superfoods diet
-

Before we get started on the superfoods, it's important to understand what a superfood is as well as the basics of good nutrition and a sound diet. The superfoods all have super health benefits; however, they'll have a bigger impact if you improve the rest of your diet as well.

In this chapter, we introduce you to superfoods and give you the basics of good nutrition. We help you figure out how many calories you need every day, and we show you examples of how superfoods fit into a well-balanced diet.

Understanding the Difference between Foods and Superfoods

What are superfoods? Your body requires food for essential nutrients and energy. But some foods are better than others. Some foods are bad for your health, and eating them can raise your risk of certain diseases. In contrast, some foods are good for you because they give you the energy you need and a few nutrients. At the top of the heap are *superfoods*, which are rich in nutrients and natural substances that have been shown by research studies to improve your health and reduce your risk for disease.

Disease is an impairment of health by a condition of the body or mind that causes dysfunction. *Health* is a condition of well-being free from disease. Eating foods that have poor nutritional value leads to *malnutrition*, which can cause

dysfunction of the body and therefore is a form of disease. You need to eat foods that have the correct nutrients to help keep yourself in good health.

Superfoods have been shown to be especially good for you because they're rich in vitamins and minerals, plus they have extra compounds that have a positive impact on your health. These compounds may include good fats like omega-3 fatty acids and monounsaturated fats, a variety of phytochemicals (natural chemicals found in plants), and dietary fiber. All our recommended superfoods have been involved in scientific studies that back up the health claims.



Adding a few superfoods to your diet can improve your health by keeping your heart healthy, boosting your immune system, making it easier to lose weight, fending off diabetes, preventing some cancers, and much more. Eating a superfoods-rich diet also allows you to age gracefully and beautifully.

Boning Up on Basic Nutrition

The foods you eat supply your body with the energy you need to get through the day, along with the raw materials to keep all your organ systems running smoothly. Eating a diet with the right amounts of nutrients accomplishes just that, and superfoods do it in spades.

When you eat a diet with too many calories and unhealthful foods, you're at great risk of becoming obese. Not only do bad foods fail to give you all the nutrients you need, but they also damage your body. While the occasional candy bar or bacon cheeseburger with fries probably won't hurt you, making a daily habit of eating these kinds of foods will. Superfoods contain lots of nutrients, so eating superfoods makes it easy to get the nutrients you need without unwanted calories and unhealthy ingredients.

Picking out foods is easier when you understand what nutrients are and what they do for your body. *Nutrients* are the substances in food that your body uses for energy and to build tissues. There are big nutrients, small nutrients, and special nutrients called phytochemicals. The following sections tell you what you need to know about each type.

Introducing the big nutrients you need: Carbs, proteins, and fats

Macronutrients is the technical term for the big nutrients: carbohydrates, protein, and fats. You need to eat foods that contain all three of the macronutrients in a healthful balance every day. Eating superfoods helps you maintain this balance because superfoods contain healthy ratios of these macronutrients and high amounts of the healthiest nutrients.

Low fat versus low carb: Which is best?

Low-fat diets became popular in the 1980s. They emphasized cutting back on unhealthy, high-calorie, fatty foods, thereby helping people to lose weight. Unfortunately, food manufacturers began making low-fat and non-fat foods that were still high in calories. Of course, these products became very popular and people stopped losing weight.

In the 1990s, low-carb diets became all the rage, and, again, people lost weight when they cut high-calorie sugary foods out of their diets.

Then low-carb, sugar-free foods arrived, but they, too, were high in calories, so Americans continued to gain weight.

So which is best? We think the answer lies in the middle, with a balanced diet and the right amount of calories. That means reducing the amount of bad fats (like the low-fat diets), but keeping the good fats. It also means dumping the sugar (like the low-carb diets), but keeping whole grains and healthful fruits and vegetables.

Coping with carbohydrates

Carbohydrates include simple sugars and complex carbohydrates (starches), and we put fiber in this category, too. Dietary carbohydrates are found in foods that come from plant sources. Your body uses carbohydrates as fuel, so a large part of your diet should be made up of carbohydrates. In fact, about half of your daily calories should come from carbohydrates — but some are better than others.

All carbohydrates are made up of some combination of three simple sugars officially known as *monosaccharides* (single sugar units). These three sugars are galactose (milk sugar), fructose (fruit sugar), and glucose (the type of sugar your body uses as fuel).

Sucrose (table sugar) and lactose (milk sugar) are other types of simple sugars called *disaccharides* (two-sugar units). Lactose is made up of glucose and galactose and is formed in the mammary glands in breast tissue. Sucrose is made up of glucose and fructose. It doesn't matter whether the sugar is white, brown, or raw (*turbinado*); they're all the same. Sucrose molecules are broken down and digested very quickly. Your body either uses the resultant fructose and glucose molecules as energy or converts them to fat and stores them on your body, usually on your belly, butt, or thighs.

Starch (a complex carbohydrate) is made up of long chains of glucose molecules. Starch isn't broken down as quickly as sucrose, but it's still metabolized efficiently. And, just like simple sugars, extra starch is converted to fat.

Fiber is plant material that you can't digest, but it's very important for good health. Insoluble fiber doesn't dissolve in water; instead, it absorbs it. Insoluble fiber remains in solid form, adding bulk to your stool, which helps the muscles of the colon move stool through the digestive system. Soluble

fiber dissolves in water, forming a protective gel that also adds bulk (and works as a natural stool-softener) and has other important health benefits such as lowering cholesterol.

So which carbohydrates are good and which ones are bad? The refined carbohydrates that aren't accompanied by any (or only very little) fiber are usually bad, with table sugar and high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) being the worst. They're highly refined, so they add a lot of sweetness but don't provide any nutrition other than calories. Diets high in sucrose and HFCS lead to obesity, heart disease, and diabetes.

Refined flour is just a step or two above refined sugar. Refined flour has had most of the fibrous parts (along with a good bit of the nutrition) removed. Most flour is enriched, however, which adds several vitamins back. Foods like regular pasta, white bread, and crackers are made from refined flour. Choose whole-grain (unrefined) products whenever possible to increase the amount of fiber in your diet because, unlike refined grains, whole grains retain the parts of the plant that contain the healthy fiber content.



Good carbohydrates are usually accompanied by a good dose of fiber. Besides whole grains, good carbohydrates are found in fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, and seeds, many of which have attained superfood status. Fiber slows down the digestion and absorption of carbohydrates, which helps to regulate your blood sugar level (which is good for energy and for preventing diabetes) and keeps you feeling full. The best part is that fiber has zero calories.



Fruit juices are high in natural sugars and low in fiber (unless you leave in the pulp), but they're also rich in vitamins and minerals, so they're good carbohydrates. One bit of caution if you're watching your weight: The natural sugars in fruit juice are absorbed quickly and can be high in calories. Eat whole fresh fruits whenever you can.

The best carbohydrates are found in most of our superfoods. They are unrefined carbohydrates accompanied by nutrients and phytochemicals (see the upcoming section “Zeroing in on superfoods nutrients: Phytochemicals”), and/or are high in fiber.

Pondering proteins

Proteins are chains of little chemical building blocks called *amino acids*. After you eat protein, the chains are broken down into individual amino acids, which are absorbed into your blood. Your body takes the amino acids, builds new proteins out of them, and uses them as the raw material to maintain and repair almost every part of your body.

All animal products contain protein, including meats, fish, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. The proteins in animal products are called complete proteins because they contain all the *essential amino acids* (amino acids that need to come from the diet because your body can't make them on its own). Plant

foods contain proteins, too — especially nuts, seeds, and legumes — but most plants are missing one or more of the essential amino acids and thus are called *incomplete proteins*. This is important for vegetarians and vegans to know so they can find the right combination of foods to get all the amino acids. Fortunately, some food plants, like soy, are complete proteins, and, if you eat a variety of plant foods — grains, nuts, seeds, and veggies — every day, you can get all the amino acids you need.

Apart from being complete or incomplete, there isn't much difference in the proteins you eat. What makes proteins good or bad is the type of fat that accompanies them. For example, red meat with lots of saturated fat isn't a good source of protein and should be limited. Lean meats are better, and fish that are rich in healthy fats (see Chapter 7) are the best. Plant proteins are always a healthful choice because they're accompanied by good fats and fiber.



Cooking methods can make a difference, too. A piece of baked fish is good for you, but deep-fat fried fish is not.

You don't need large amounts of protein. In fact, only about 15 to 20 percent of your calories should come from protein. Our superfood proteins include legumes and whole grains (see Chapter 8) and nuts and seeds (see Chapter 6).

What's the fuss about fats?

The fats and oils in the foods you eat are made up of individual molecules called fatty acids. Your body needs some fats; in fact, they should comprise about 30 percent of the calories you take in daily. Fats are important for lubrication of body surfaces, formation of hormones, energy storage, and insulation from cold. Limited amounts of fat help protect internal organs, and fats also carry the fat-soluble vitamins that are necessary components of the membranes that surround all the cells in your body.

But not all fats are created equal. Some are very good for you, whereas others are bad for your health:

✓ **Saturated fats:** These fats are found mostly in animal products like red fatty meats, eggs, and dairy products. They're solid at room temperature. Coconut and other tropical oils also contain large amounts of saturated fat. Eating saturated fats causes your level of cholesterol (a type of blood fat) to go up and promotes inflammation. Diets rich in saturated fats are associated with both an increased risk of heart disease and an increased risk of some cancers. Our superfoods are all low in saturated fats.

Keep your consumption of high-fat red meats to only two or three meals per week. Choose more fish, lean poultry, legumes, nuts, and seeds.

✓ **Trans-fats:** Most trans-fats are created by forcing hydrogen into vegetable oils to make them more solid. Some stick margarines, for example, undergo this process. (Dairy products have a natural trans-fat, but it doesn't seem to be as harmful as the artificial kind.) The process, called



partial hydrogenation, alters the structure of the fatty acids to look more like saturated fats. Unfortunately, trans-fats are worse for your health than saturated fats, and you should avoid them whenever possible. Trans-fats are most commonly found in processed snack foods, oils that are used for deep frying, and pastries, as well as some brands of margarine. The superfoods don't have any trans-fats.

Read the labels on packaged foods to be sure they don't contain any trans-fats.



- ✓ **Monounsaturated fats:** These fatty acids are found in abundance in some plants. Olive oil is the best known example, but canola oil, peanuts, and avocados also contain some monounsaturated fatty acids. Monounsaturated fats are liquid at room temperature and are good for you. Eating monounsaturated fats in place of saturated fats has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease. Monounsaturated fats lower your cholesterol, reduce inflammation, keep your blood vessels healthy, and may reduce your risk of some cancers. Many of the superfoods contain large amounts of monounsaturated fats.

- ✓ Choose monounsaturated fats often — every day if possible. Use olive oil for cooking and as a salad dressing.
- ✓ **Polyunsaturated fats:** These fats are liquid at room temperature and are abundant in plant oils and fish. There are two types of polyunsaturated fats: omega-3 fatty acids (found in fish, flax seeds, and chia seeds) and omega-6 fatty acids (found in most vegetable and seed oils). Both of these fatty acids are important for good health. They're called essential fatty acids because you have to get them from your diet — your body can't manufacture them from other fats.

There's one problem with polyunsaturated fats, though. Most people get plenty of the omega-6 fatty acids in their diet; in fact, most people get too many because vegetable oils are common in many foods. The opposite is true for the omega-3 fatty acids — most people are deficient. Eating too many of the omega-6s and too few of the omega-3s leads to an imbalance that promotes inflammation in the body. Eating the right amount, about a 4 to 1 ratio of omega-6s to omega-3s, helps to reduce inflammation and improve your health. The typical ratio in the Western diet is 15 or 16 to 1.

Many of our superfoods are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, especially our fish (see Chapter 7), flax and pumpkin seeds (see Chapter 6), and chia seeds (see Chapter 10).

Getting to know the little nutrients you need: Vitamins and minerals

Micronutrients (the little nutrients) include vitamins and minerals. You don't need large amounts of these nutrients compared to the macronutrients, but

you do need small amounts on a regular basis to keep your body working at its best. Most of the superfoods are rich in some of the micronutrients, but none are rich in all of them — that's why you need a balanced diet.

When you eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes, fish, lean meats, and low-fat dairy products, you get the vitamins you need every day. When you make sure some of those foods are superfoods, you get even more nutrition plus all the powerful fats, fiber, and phytochemicals that keep you feeling young and healthy.

Becoming versed in water-soluble vitamins

Water-soluble vitamins dissolve in water and aren't as easily stored by the body as fat-soluble vitamins. The foods you eat must supply the eight B complex vitamins and vitamin C every day because your body consistently eliminates them (except for vitamin B12). Water-soluble vitamins also are more fragile and can be destroyed during cooking. By eating a healthful superfoods-rich diet, you're able to get plenty of these vitamins.

The B complex vitamins include thiamine (B1), riboflavin (B2), niacin (B3), pantothenic acid, pyridoxine (B6), folate, cobalamin (B12), and biotin. The B vitamins are found in a wide variety of foods (except for B12, which is only found in animal products). B vitamins help you convert the macronutrients from the foods you eat into energy, plus they're necessary for many other normal body functions.

Vitamin C is found in fruits and vegetables, especially citrus fruits, strawberries, and peppers. Vitamin C is needed for normal immune system function, speedy wound healing, and strong connective tissue.

Finding the fat-soluble vitamins

Fat-soluble vitamins are stored in fatty tissues and your liver, so you won't become deficient in these vitamins as quickly as with the water-soluble vitamins. Vitamin A is needed for normal vision and cell growth and is found in both plant-based foods and animal products. Vitamin E is found in nuts and seeds and works as an antioxidant to protect the cells in your body from free-radical damage. Vitamin K is found in leafy green vegetables and is essential for normal blood clotting.

A healthful, balanced diet provides just the right amounts of these vitamins, except for vitamin D, which is made by your body after your skin is exposed to sunlight. You need about 5 to 20 minutes of sun exposure to your face, arms, or legs twice each week to form a sufficient amount of vitamin D. Some foods (like milk) are fortified with extra vitamin D, or you can always get vitamin D through supplements. The American Academy of Dermatology recommends utilizing fortified foods and supplements for vitamin D rather than sun exposure because of the risk of skin cancer.

Minding the major minerals

Major minerals include calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, chlorine, potassium, sodium, and sulfur. They're called *major* because you need to replenish them with amounts greater than 0.01 percent of your body weight every day. Major minerals are found in a variety of foods. A healthful diet contains all the minerals you need, although calcium is commonly taken as a dietary supplement.

Calcium is important for many processes in your body and is especially important for strong bones, muscle function, and normal blood clotting. Magnesium and phosphorus are also important for bone health, and magnesium is present in your muscles, too. Potassium, chloride, and sodium are called *electrolytes*: They work to keep your body fluids in balance, which affects your blood pressure. Sulfur is used in making some proteins.



Many of the superfoods are rich in calcium, magnesium, and potassium, while remaining low in sodium. Although sodium is necessary for good health, most people consume way too much of it, which can lead to high blood pressure.

Tackling the trace minerals

Trace minerals include iron, iodine, cobalt, copper, fluoride, manganese, molybdenum, selenium, vanadium, and zinc. You don't need quite as much of the trace minerals as you do the major minerals; however, they're just as important for maintaining a healthy body.

Iron, copper, and cobalt are necessary for normal red blood cell production; iodine helps your thyroid; fluoride is good for your teeth; molybdenum, vanadium, and zinc are cofactors in many chemical reactions; and selenium is an antioxidant.



Our superfoods provide varying amounts of the trace minerals, especially iron, selenium, manganese, and zinc.

Zeroing in on superfoods nutrients: Phytochemicals

Phytochemicals are plant chemicals that offer a variety of health benefits, and all our plant-based superfoods are rich in phytochemicals. There are several different types of phytochemicals (we go into details for each superfood in Chapters 4–6 and 8–10). Here's a basic rundown:

- ✓ **Polyphenols** are a family of related phytochemicals that includes bioflavonoids, tannins, and lignans.
 - **Bioflavonoids** are produced in plants and include some of the pigments found in red, blue, purple, and black fruits, vegetables, and

legumes. Bioflavonoids like quercetin, anthocyanadins, and catechins help to reduce inflammation, protect your heart, and reduce your risk of some cancers.

- **Tannins** are found in tea and red wine. Tannins may help to keep your digestive system healthy.
- **Lignans** are found in the cell walls of plants and have hormone-like properties. Flax and soy are particularly rich in lignans and may help to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- ✓ **Carotenoids** are related to vitamin A and are found in red, yellow, and orange pigments. Examples include beta-carotene, lycopene, and lutein. The carotenoids may help to keep your vision healthy, bolster your immune system, and reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and some cancers.
- ✓ **Phytosterols** are the plant equivalent of cholesterol. However, unlike the cholesterol found in animal products, phytosterols are good for you. Some phytosterols, such as *beta-sitosterol*, help to reduce the symptoms of an enlarged prostate and are effective for keeping your cholesterol levels in check.



Not every superfood fruit or veggie has all the phytochemicals you need. Eat a variety of superfoods to be sure you get all the different phytochemicals.

Creating a Healthy, Balanced Superfoods Diet

Creating a healthy diet requires a little planning, so start by determining how many calories you (and your family members) need. Knowing how many calories you need helps you determine how much and which kinds of foods you should eat. Superfoods have excellent nutrient-to-calorie ratios when compared to other foods.

If you need to lose some weight, cut back on calories by choosing more foods that are high in fiber and low in fat and sugar, which describes many superfoods. If you want to gain weight, add more energy-dense foods like olive oil, nuts, and seeds to your diet so you can gain weight without losing out on valuable nutrients.



You can find books and Web sites that list the calorie counts for many foods. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a very large database of nutrition information for just about every food you can think of at www.usda.gov. Simply click Food and Nutrition from the menu on the left and then click What's in the Foods You Eat – Search Tool.

Forgoing fad diets

Fad diets come and go quickly, mostly because, in the end, they're not particularly successful. The typical fad diet requires you to restrict specific foods (sometimes most or all of certain food groups) while claiming that you don't need to watch calories, exercise, or do anything else —

but you may need to buy expensive diet pills. Don't fall for these diet claims; they don't work in the long run. Fad diets may help with quick weight loss, but to lose weight and keep it off, you need to eat less, eat right, and exercise more. There aren't any exceptions.

The USDA also has created a food pyramid that helps guide your dietary choices. If counting every calorie seems tedious, you may want to keep track of the number of servings you have of each of the food groups instead.

How do you fit all those servings into your day? Planning your meals and your daily menus makes eating a healthful diet much easier. Plus it makes grocery shopping less of a chore. By planning your meals for a week, you can make a shopping list and buy all the foods and ingredients you'll need at one time. You can even prepare a lot of your meals ahead of time to make eating healthfully easier if you have a hectic schedule. (See Chapter 15 for more on storing and freezing your superfoods.)

Determining how many calories you need

Calories (sometimes called *kilocalories*) measure the amount of energy available in the foods you eat. The number of calories you need every day depends on how old you are, how big you are, whether you're male or female, how active you are, and whether you're pregnant or nursing. When you get the right number of calories every day, you'll be at a healthful weight. If you don't eat enough calories, you'll become underweight. And if you get too many, you'll become overweight and possibly obese. Being overweight or obese increases your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some cancers.



You can go online and find calculators to help you estimate how many calories you need every day to maintain, gain, or lose weight. Check out www.bmi-calculator.net or www.nutritiondata.com for easy-to-use calculators. Or you can calculate your calorie needs with two formulas. The first one calculates how many calories you need just to be awake and breathing. The second formula factors in your activity level:

Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR) Formula

Women: $\text{BMR} = 655 + (4.35 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (4.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$

Men: $\text{BMR} = 66 + (6.23 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (12.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (6.8 \times \text{age in years})$

Harris Benedict Formula

If you're sedentary (little or no exercise): $\text{Calorie Calculation} = \text{BMR} \times 1.2$

If you're lightly active (light exercise/sports 1–3 days/week): $\text{Calorie Calculation} = \text{BMR} \times 1.375$

If you're moderately active (moderate exercise/sports 3–5 days/week): $\text{Calorie Calculation} = \text{BMR} \times 1.55$

If you're very active (hard exercise/sports 6–7 days a week): $\text{Calorie Calculation} = \text{BMR} \times 1.725$

If you're extra active (very hard exercise/sports and physical job or double training): $\text{Calorie Calculation} = \text{BMR} \times 1.9$

For example, a 35-year-old, moderately active woman who is 5'5" tall and weighs 125 pounds has a BMR of $655 + (4.35 \times 125) + (4.7 \times 65) - (4.7 \times 35)$, or 1,340 calories. Because she's moderately active, we multiply $1,340 \times 1.55$ for a grand total of 2,077, which is the number of calories she needs every day to maintain her weight.

We include nutrition information for all our superfoods, including calorie counts, so you'll know how the superfoods fit into your daily intake of calories. Most of our superfoods are low in calories, and the ones that are more *energy dense* (higher in calories) are very rich in nutrients so you only need to eat a little bit to reap their rewards.

Following the food pyramid with superfoods

The USDA created its food pyramid to help Americans understand how many servings of healthful foods they need every day. You can find more information on the food pyramid at www.mypyramid.gov, but here's the general idea:

- ✓ **Breads and cereals:** Six to eleven servings every day. At least half of your servings from this group should be whole-grain. Choose bread, plain cereals, and pasta. Avoid pastries and sugary cereals.

- ✓ **Fruits and vegetables:** At least 2 cups of fruit and 2½ cups of vegetables. Eat fresh fruits and vegetables whenever possible, and remember that cooking methods matter — steaming is better than boiling.
- ✓ **Dairy products and calcium:** Three servings every day. Choose low-fat milk, cheese, or yogurt.
- ✓ **Meats and proteins:** Two or three servings each day. Choose fish, poultry, eggs, lean meats, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Cut back on fatty red meat and avoid deep-fried meat.
- ✓ **Fats and oils:** Two servings of fats and oils daily, which should come from fish, nuts, seeds, or vegetable oils.
- ✓ **Discretionary calories:** The pyramid leaves just a little room for treats — usually about 100 to 150 calories or so per day.

Here's how you can fit superfoods into the USDA pyramid:

- ✓ **Breads and cereals:** At least half of your servings from this group should be whole-grain. Superfood grains include oats and quinoa (see Chapter 8). Both grains make great breakfast cereals, and quinoa can be eaten as a side dish. Oats can be added to bread and other baked goods, and sometimes oats can be used in place of flour in cooking (see Chapters 16–19 for some ideas).
- ✓ **Fruits and vegetables:** We think this is the most important group because fruits and vegetables are packed with nutrition and fiber, and most people don't eat enough of them. Superfood fruits include oranges, bananas, strawberries, blueberries, cherries, cranberries, and pomegranate (see Chapter 4). All these fruits can be enjoyed as fresh snacks or added to healthful foods. Superfoods vegetables include spinach, broccoli, kale, tomatoes, avocados, beets, and carrots (see Chapter 5). They're all terrific in salads, sides, and some main dishes.
- ✓ **Dairy products and calcium:** We didn't include any dairy products in our list of superfoods; however, many of our superfoods go great with non-fat yogurt (think of a berry and nut parfait). Non-fat yogurt is a great source of calcium and contains beneficial bacteria that are good for your health. Calcium is very important for good health, and superfoods sources of calcium include spinach, broccoli, and kale (see Chapter 5); sardines (see Chapter 7); soy (see Chapter 8); and almonds and Brazil nuts (see Chapter 6).
- ✓ **Meats and proteins:** Salmon, tuna, sardines, and trout are rich in omega-3 fatty acids and low in saturated fat, so they're terrific as protein sources (see Chapter 7). Dry beans, soy, and lentils are high-quality plant proteins that can be used as substitutes for high-fat red meats (see Chapter 8). Nuts and seeds make great protein- and fiber-rich snacks (see Chapter 6).

- ✓ **Fats and oils:** Olive oil is rich in monounsaturated fatty acids that are good for your health (see Chapter 9). Flax oil is good for you, too (see Chapter 6). These oils are much healthier than the saturated fats found in red meat and dairy products. Olive oil is good for cooking or for making salad dressings. You don't want to cook with flax oil, but it makes a great supplemental oil or topping for salads and vegetables.
- ✓ **Discretionary calories:** Depending on how many calories you can have each day, you'll probably want to save a few for snacks and tasty treats. We suggest a little dark chocolate or a small glass of wine because of their antioxidant properties (see Chapter 9).

Planning superfood meals and menus

The first step in planning healthful meals is to go for a balance of carbohydrates, proteins, and good fats, while reducing sugar, excess sodium, and bad fats. You can accomplish that by following the food pyramid serving suggestions.

The second step is to find places to fit the superfoods into your menu. Superfoods vegetables make great side dishes or salads. The fruits and nuts are perfect for snacks or dessert. The superfoods fish and legumes fit nicely into any dinner. Oats are great for breakfast, and there's even room for a small glass of red wine with dinner or a piece of dark chocolate later on.

So what does a superfood menu look like? We suggest you start out by focusing on a healthful, balanced diet that includes two superfoods each day. Your day could look something like this:

- ✓ **Breakfast:** Oatmeal with low-fat milk, raisins, and honey; one slice of toast with peanut butter; and coffee. Oatmeal counts as your first superfood of the day.
- ✓ **Mid-morning snack:** Celery sticks with veggie dip.
- ✓ **Lunch:** Chicken sandwich with light mayonnaise, one slice of cheese, and lettuce on whole-grain bread, and a small green salad with no more than 2 tablespoons of salad dressing.
- ✓ **Mid-afternoon snack:** Six crackers with thin slices of cheese, one sliced pear, and a diet soft drink.
- ✓ **Dinner:** Roast beef, a baked potato with light sour cream, and a side of steamed broccoli with a dab of butter or non-trans-fat margarine. Broccoli is your second superfood for the day.
- ✓ **Evening snack:** One cup of flavored yogurt.

As you can see, a daily menu like this has plenty of food and flavor without sacrificing good nutrition. And it's easy to add even more superfoods. The following meal plan incorporates five:

- ✓ **Breakfast:** Oatmeal with low-fat milk, blueberries, and honey; one slice of toast with peanut butter; and coffee. Oatmeal is your first superfood, and blueberries are your second.
- ✓ **Mid-morning snack:** One apple with one slice of cheddar cheese and water. The apple is your third superfood.
- ✓ **Lunch:** Bowl of low-sodium chicken noodle soup, one whole-grain roll, and a green salad with no more than 2 tablespoons salad dressing.
- ✓ **Mid-afternoon snack:** A single-serving bag of almonds. Almonds are your fourth superfood.
- ✓ **Dinner:** Baked salmon with mashed potatoes and green beans. Salmon is your fifth superfood for the day.
- ✓ **Evening snack:** One cup of flavored yogurt.

These are just two examples of superfoods menus — throughout the book, we describe more ways to fit superfoods into your day. Enjoying a superfoods diet is easy and delicious.

Taking the First Steps toward a Healthier You with Superfoods

Now that you're armed with nutrition information and you know how to plan your meals, it's time to get started on your superfoods diet. In the following chapters, we tell you more about superfoods, how to prepare them, and how to fit each of them into your superfoods diet. Here's your game plan:

- ✓ **Read the rest of this book.** We don't mind if you jump around the book and read whichever chapters interest you the most first. The book contains a lot of information on superfoods, and we know you'll discover a lot.
- ✓ **Start with two superfoods each day and increase the number as you feel comfortable.** We've mentioned a few superfoods in this chapter (or you can look ahead for more), so you can get started with your superfoods regimen right away.
- ✓ **Reduce the amount of foods you eat that are bad for your health.** That includes the fatty red meats, deep-fried foods, sugary foods, greasy

snack foods, and foods that are heavily processed. Replace those bad foods with good foods like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, nuts, seeds, legumes, and low-fat dairy products.

- ✓ **Keep a food diary to help you keep track of your superfoods diet.** Writing down the foods you eat and the beverages you drink every day improves your chances of turning your new dietary changes into a permanent lifestyle. You really don't need anything fancy; a small notebook will do. At the end of every day, you can see whether your food choices were good or bad and how many superfoods you ate.
- ✓ **Exercise.** The American Heart Association recommends a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise five days a week. Exercise works along with superfoods to help you manage your weight and promote a healthy heart.
- ✓ **Get your family and friends involved.** It's much easier to accomplish diet and exercise goals when you do it with a partner. Lead by example and rope some friends or family members into a healthy lifestyle.

If at first you don't succeed . . . don't give up! Rome wasn't built in a day and you don't have to change your diet overnight. It's okay if you slip up — just start again and continue to make healthier food choices and add more superfoods. Ultimately, your superfoods diet will last a lifetime (and a long one at that!).

