

Artichoke Promotes Healthy Fat Digestion and Metabolism

In discussing the health benefits of the artichoke, and the way it promotes healthy fat digestion and metabolism, we are talking here about the true artichoke: the globe artichoke. The alternative Jerusalem artichoke is not an artichoke at all, but a member of the sunflower family. The globe artichoke is a type of thistle.

It is in fact a perennial thistle that originated in the Mediterranean area and is now cultivated world wide. The edible portions are the lower parts of the bracts and the base of the buds, known as the heart while the inedible portion in the center of the bud is known as the 'choke'. Globe artichokes were introduced to the USA in the 19th century by French and Spanish immigrants who settled in Louisiana and California respectively. Contrary to popular opinion its name did not come from the 'heart' and the 'choke', but from the Arabic for ground thorn: 'ardi shauki'.

In today's world of fast foods, a high consumption of fats and red meat and excessive alcohol consumption, your liver is put under a great strain. Its main function is as a chemical factory, to produce the chemicals, such as enzymes and other proteins, needed to maintain life and also to metabolise the nutrients we need from the food we eat. If you overtax your liver it will not work as it should, which results in poor digestion and assimilation of the nutrients in your food and an increase in the toxins in your blood.

You will feel tired and run down, with digestion problems and many other health complaints. Liver abuse can result in malnutrition, which also results in cirrhosis which is not curable. You should seriously appraise your diet, and identify the eating and drinking habits that are causing the problem, and give your liver a rest. Artichoke extract is a great liver tonic, and your liver will respond well to a break from alcohol and fatty foods, and a course of artichoke leaves and extract.

The main active ingredient of the artichoke is cynarine (1,5-dicaffeoylquinic acid), a substance that stimulates the production of bile, and hence renders the artichoke an excellent starter for any meal. This is yet another example of science finding a logical reason for people eating artichokes for centuries in order to promote the health of their liver and digestive system. It is not only for its cynarine content that the globe artichoke is useful, however, but also the luteolin and chlorogenic acids that it contains.

The stimulation of bile production by the cynarine is one the more important of the effects of artichoke on your well being. Bile emulsifies fats and renders them into an easily digested form. Most of the digestive chemicals are water soluble, and without this emulsification of the fat with water then most of the fats we consume would pass through the body unchanged. We would lose the vast majority of the fat soluble nutrients in our food, including vitamins A, D, E and K.

Bile enables us to digest fats and to absorb vitamins from our food, and also promotes the general health of our digestive system. It is biosynthesized in the liver from various enzymes and triglycerides and then stored in the gall bladder until needed. Its use is prompted by the presence of fats in the system, and this is stimulated by the cynarine in the artichoke leaves.

Its ability to improve bile flow has been recognized by scientists world wide, and artichoke juice has been used by the French for many years as a liver tonic. However, it is not just for the liver and the digestive system that artichokes are useful in maintaining good health. They also have an effect on the cholesterol levels in your blood. This is believed to be due to the inhibition of the activity of enzyme HMG CoA Reductase that helps the liver to generate cholesterol. Inhibiting the activity of this enzyme reduces the amount of cholesterol produced.

This can have the effect of reduced the possibility of you developing atherosclerosis, a condition caused by deposition of low density lipid (LDL) cholesterol through the effect of free radical oxidation of the lipid. The less cholesterol to be transported by your blood, then the lower levels of the low density lipid needed to do this. This effect is also possibly due to the fact that bile is formed from cholesterol and triglycerides, and so stimulated bile production would possibly leave less cholesterol in the bloodstream.

Artichoke also possesses antioxidant properties that would contribute even further to this effect by preventing the oxidation of the LDL by free radicals. These free radicals, formed in the body both naturally and by the effects of pollutants such as pesticides, cigarette smoke and traffic fumes, are destroyed by antioxidants. In atherosclerosis the LDL lipids are oxidised and deposited under the surface cells of the blood vessels, and are then digested by certain blood cells forming a hard fatty deposit that can eventually block the arteries affected.

The result can be a heart attack or a stroke, depending on where in the body the blood vessels are affected, and if the cholesterol levels in the body are decreased through it being used to produce bile, then the concentration of LDL lipids used to transport it will also be reduced and the condition will be less likely to occur..

Apart from the liver, the gall bladder is also given a boost by artichoke because that is where bile is stored, and a regular flow to and from the gall bladder maintains its health. The only thing you should be aware of is that if you are prone to gallstones then the increase in bile flow could cause the stones to be stuck in the bile duct. You should therefore refer to your physician before embarking on a course of artichoke extract if you have a propensity to develop gallstones.

Apart from the phytonutrients already discussed, the globe artichoke also contains a good supply of fiber and minerals such as potassium, iron, calcium and phosphorus, and also some trace elements that your body needs. It is therefore more than just a bile stimulant, but provides a wide range of essential nutrition to your body. It is known to aid conditions such as gout, high blood sugar, and digestive complaints such as flatulence, bloating and abdominal cramps.

Apart from cooking and eating the tender parts of the leaves, or bracts, you can make an infusion of the parts that you don't eat. Chop up the tougher leaves and pour boiling water over them as if making tea. Leave it to infuse for a few minutes and then drink. Honey can be used to take away the bitter taste; honey rather than sugar due to its greater nutritional content.

About the Author

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