Alfalfa Is One Of Nature's Most Nutrient-Rich Foods

Most people have likely heard of alfalfa in relation to its use as an important animal feedstuff without understanding that it is one of nature's most nutrient-rich foods. It appears to be a trait with most people, that what is used for animal feed cannot possibly be healthy to humans.

This completely ignores the fact that humans are themselves mammals, and what is good for the biochemistry of one mammal is likely (though not necessarily) good for most. A look at alfalfa and why it has been used to feed livestock is a good place to start a discussion on its merits as a nutritional supplement for human beings.

Alfalfa is a legume, or member of the pea and bean family, that has long been used as animal food and has been given the nickname "Queen of Forages". It is behind only corn, wheat and soybeans as the fourth largest crop grown in the USA, and the vast majority is for animal forage. In fact there is twice as much alfalfa grown in the USA as cotton. Its nutritional value is not only from its high protein content of around 20%, but also from its exceptional vitamin and mineral content.

Although grown predominantly for animals, humans also eat alfalfa sprouts, although by far its greatest nutritional use is in supplement form. Before discussing specific claimed benefits such as its use in lowering blood glucose and cholesterol, alleviating the symptoms of arthritis and helping with digestive problems among only dozens of other traditional uses, it would be useful to review the nutritional content of the legume in terms of vitamins, minerals and any other biochemical content that could provide more general health benefits.

The vitamin and mineral content is not disputed, being determined by chemical analysis. It is not so much what is present in terms of variety that is impressive, but how much of each that alfalfa contains. Natural protein that is easily assimilated by the body has already been touched on, ranging from around 15% to over 20%. Many people also stress the rich chlorophyll content, but apart from the magnesium, chlorophyll has no nutritional benefit to humans. However, now for the impressive facts:

Alfalfa contains a high concentration of Vitamins A, B1, B2, B6, B12, C, D, E and K and also Niacin, Biotin, Pantothenic Acid, Biotin and Folic Acid. It is also rich in the following minerals: Boron, Calcium, Chlorine, Cobalt, Copper, Iron, Magnesium, Manganese, Molybdenum, Phosphorus, Potassium, Sulfur and also some trace minerals. When you purchase alfalfa supplements you also get eight essential amino acids, necessary for the biosynthesis of proteins, enzymes and DNA.

Little wonder then that alfalfa has a long history of medicinal uses, and is also used as a feed for animals, providing practically all of their protein, vitamin and mineral dietary needs. The same could also be said of humans, and alfalfa is not classed as a 'superfood' without good reason.

However, it is easy to determine the fact that this plant is of high nutritional value, but when or why should you take alfalfa supplements, especially if you have a good dietary regime? In fact several facts are known through studies of the plant and also by traditional and established usage for certain ailments. Although not all claims can be scientifically verified beyond all doubt, it has been generally agreed that alfalfa is instrumental in reducing the uric acid content of your system, and is hence useful in the treatment of certain types of arthritis, and also perhaps gout.

Although the latter has not been unconditionally proven it has been traditionally used to treat gout that is caused by deposition of uric acid crystals in the joints, and further, alfalfa also contains many of the minerals recommended for its treatment. It is not, therefore, an unreasonable assumption that it should be an effective treatment. There are a few medical applications of alfalfa that have been carried out under controlled conditions, and while the official line is that more testing is required to firmly establish any benefits gained by taking the supplement, many people claim that it has been effective in the treatment of their own medical conditions.

Atherosclerosis, which is caused by excessive deposition of cholesterol in the arteries, has been reported to be reduced in animal studies, and while many people also claim that their condition has improved, more evidence is necessary before their claims can be scientifically supported. This, however, could be connected with the greater body of evidence suggesting that alfalfa supplements can help to reduce your LDL cholesterol levels.

It is free radical oxidation of low density lipoproteins that render the cholesterol attached to them more liable to be deposited excessively in your arteries, thereby causing the aforementioned atherosclerosis. The evidence of the effect of alfalfa in reducing LDL cholesterol is very promising, and if substantiated could well provide the proof needed that the supplement does indeed reduce the incidences of cholesterol plaques inside your arteries.

The same is true with regard to the reduction in blood glucose claimed to occur after taking an alfalfa supplement. Recorded human data is scarce, although once again some people claim that the supplement has improved their condition. However, in this case it is clear that more evidence is required before any claims can be made with any degree of confidence.

It is probably wise not to regard alfalfa as being a panacea for any of the above conditions, but it is also fair to regard it as being very rich in vitamins, minerals and proteins. Perhaps this is why it is believed to help with some common digestive complaints, and also help to control high blood pressure and improve your mental function. Whatever your belief in the health benefits of alfalfa supplements, you should consult a physician before relying on it as a definitive treatment for any condition. This is particularly true if you are also being treated for another condition.

Alfalfa might not specifically interact with any other drug, but you should always check up with your doctor when using any natural remedy in association with a prescription medicine. It contains a number of other vitamins which might interact with specific medications. Vitamin K, for example, can interfere with the action of blood-thinning drugs such as warfarin. This is not specific to alfalfa, and any foodstuff rich in a specific nutrient could equally interact with prescription medicines.

However, widespread homeopathic use over a long period of time has indicated that alfalfa has few if any side effects. It is effectively used in traditional Chinese medicine for the treatment of kidney problems and its name is derived from the Arabic for ‘father of all foods’. With over 300 nutrients and phytochemicals, alfalfa is one of nature’s most nutrient-rich foods, and its saponin and isoflavone content alone is sufficient to warrant many of the health claims made for it.

About the Author

More information on Alfalfa as a food supplement is available at VitaNet &reg, LLC Health Food Store. http://vitanetonline.com/

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