

Real Foods that Heal  
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## Jicama

The food I am accenting this week is probably unfamiliar to many, but I hope it will be a familiar friend before too long. It also has a couple of things in common with asparagus (see RFTH bulletin from August 4, 2008). Like asparagus, it is an excellent dietary source of inulin (an important dietary fiber, more about that later), and it is also an under-appreciated vegetable. But despite being way behind in the vegetable polls, jicama is showing up frequently in health food stores and specialty markets, for many good reasons.

Jicama (pronounced HICK-ah-mah), also sometimes called the Mexican turnip, is really a very simple food. It is a root vegetable, which has virtually no fat or protein, and whose carbohydrate is largely composed of soluble fiber. It is mostly water, stored with the fiber, so that a cup of sliced jicama supplies less than 50 calories, provides 6 grams of dietary fiber, 180 mg of potassium, and 24 mg vitamin C. Because it has a very low glycemic index, it is an excellent food for people with diabetes and will not be prone to raising blood sugar. Because it is high in potassium it can help promote heart health, recalling that diets high in potassium from vegetables and fruit are associated with lower risks of heart disease. Jicama can also be a part of a weight reduction plan by being a filling food that is very high in fiber and water, and very low in calories.

The soluble fiber found in jicama (and our old friend asparagus) is called inulin (pronounced IN-yew-linn). Inulin has been the subject of intensive research in recent years, and the news adds important reasons to eat plenty of foods high in this fiber. Inulin promotes bone health by enhancing absorption of calcium from other foods, thus protecting against osteoporosis. It promotes heart health because soluble fiber decreases LDL cholesterol, and your heart will be healthier when you are an ideal weight. Inulin functions in the intestine as a prebiotic, meaning it is a food for the "good" bacteria that keep your colon healthy and balance your immunity. A study from British Journal of Nutrition in 2005 summarized very positive animal and human data on the role of inulin in preventing colon cancer.

Like any food high in fiber, jicama can cause discomfort and gas if you are not accustomed to it, so start with small servings and build gradually. And because I think that balancing intake of carbohydrates, fat and protein is important each time you eat, I recommend adding a healthy fat source when this is consumed (such as olive oil in a salad dressing), and some protein for lasting energy and body maintenance.

Jicama is often eaten raw (chopped or sliced) in salads, or cooked in stews, or used in stir-fries for an interesting crunch. This recipe is my adaptation of a simple side dish from Gourmet Magazine in 2005.

Chop ½ bunch of celery on the diagonal and 2 cups of jicama sliced into matchstick size; add 3 cloves of crushed fresh garlic and sauté in a pan with 3 tbsps of extra-virgin olive oil.

When nearly done, stir in 2 tbsp of chopped fresh parsley and 1 tsp lemon juice. Add salt and pepper to taste, or substitute soy sauce for salt if you are in the mood for an Asian variation in flavor. If looking for Asian flavor, you could also do the first sauté in organic canola oil and add a drizzle of sesame oil at the end when coming out of the pan.

This will make an interesting vegetable side dish, a great alternative to “the usual” dinner fare.

To your health,

Robert Pendergrast, M.D.

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P.S. You know 5 people who deserve to know how to reduce their disease risk by food choices. Please forward this e-mail to them by using the link below.

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