

Professor John Birkbeck, adjunct professor of nutrition, Massey University Albany campus, comments on the scientific research behind Salba™ and its relevance to us in New Zealand.

Professor Vuksan's findings on Salba™ have created major interest around the world. What is the relevance for us here in New Zealand?

Professor Birkbeck: Professor Vuksan is a member of the Risk Factor Modification unit (St Michael's Hospital, University of Toronto), so he is working with an at risk population: those with Type 2 diabetes. He and his team have studied the effects of Salba™ in diabetics and found that several risk factors for coronary artery disease are improved. The adverse health conditions for which Salba™ shows promise are extremely common in New Zealand and getting more common. Thus Salba™ looks like a promising addition to the diet. There is scientific evidence for the beneficial health effects and also important - no adverse effects have been observed.

How could Salba™ benefit people who are generally healthy?

Professor Birkbeck: Salba™ is a good source of plant fibre and also contains omega 3 and 6 polyunsaturated fatty acids. People are scared away from all kinds of fats not realising that unsaturated fats are treated differently in the body from saturated fats. The traditional human diet had roughly an equal amount of both omegas, so we need to improve the balance which is currently heavily weighted towards omega 6 fats. Salba™ has a lot of omega 3 and we need more dietary sources of omega 3. Eating fish oil is not going to be the answer with depleting fish stocks and fish oils are unstable on storage. Salba™ seeds are also packed with B vitamins, protein, and minerals. There are probably other components which haven't been identified yet. That is the advantage of whole foods and there are probably some beneficial properties (in Salba™) yet to be discovered.

Is this a good food to introduce into New Zealand?

Professor Birkbeck: It looks as if it would be beneficial for many aspects of health and for prevention of some common diseases. So the general benefits such as maintaining intestinal health will benefit everyone, but the factors that benefit coronary artery disease will benefit especially those with genetic predisposition towards the disease.

What is the significance of Professor Vuksan's findings?

Professor Birkbeck: The changes he observed are very promising in terms of general health and helping prevent cardiovascular disease in diabetes.

Is bread a good food in which to add a seed such as Salba™?

Professor Birkbeck: Foods like potatoes and bread have not had good press, which is unjustified. Wholegrain breads are a perfectly good source of carbohydrates. Low carbohydrate diets have been shown to be deleterious to health. Wholegrain breads are also packed with fibre. The evidence seems to be that whole seeds and grains, provided they are not whittled away by

processing, are beneficial to health. Better health statistics are seen in people who consume wholegrain cereal products compared to those who eat such foods rarely.

They are a good source of some types of dietary fibres. Dietary fibres come in several chemically and biologically different forms. They have beneficial effects to the intestine, in maintaining intestinal health, preventing constipation and almost certainly in helping to prevent colon cancer. They also have useful effects on other things in the food, such as binding cholesterol and reducing its absorption.