

Scientists unveil 'supercarrot'

Scientists in the US say they have created a genetically-engineered carrot that provides extra calcium.

They hope that adding the vegetable to a normal diet could help ward off conditions such as brittle bone disease and osteoporosis.

Someone eating the new carrot absorbs 41% more calcium than if they ate the old, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences study suggests.

The calcium-charged vegetable still needs to go through many safety trials.

"These carrots were grown in carefully monitored and controlled environments," said Professor Kendal Hirschi, part of the team at the Baylor College of Medicine in Texas.

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Baylor College of Medicine

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But the scientists nonetheless hope their carrot could ultimately offer a healthier way of consuming sufficient quantities of the mineral.

Dairy foods are the primary dietary source of calcium but some are allergic to these while others are told to avoid consuming too much due to their high fat content.

A gene has been altered in the carrot which allows the calcium within it to cross more easily over the plant membranes.

On its own, the carrot would not meet the daily requirement of 1,000mg of calcium, but if other vegetables were similarly engineered, intake could be increased dramatically.

Changing colour

It is not the first time the carrot has been tampered with.

The orange colour we know is the result of Dutch cultivation in the 17th Century, when patriotic growers turned a vegetable which was then purple into the colour of the national flag.

Nor is it the first vegetable to receive a healthy make-over.

Genetic engineering is being used to develop potatoes with more starch and less water so that they absorb less oil when fried, producing healthier chips or crisps.

Work is also being carried out on broccoli so that it contains more sulforaphane, a chemical which may help

people ward off cancer.

Professor Susan Fairweather-Tait of the University of East Anglia said genetically engineering foods to increase their nutrient content was becoming an increasingly important avenue.

"People are being told to eat more modestly to prevent weight gain, and many diets now no longer contain everything we need.

"There has been great resistance to genetic engineering, but gradually we are moving away from the spectre of 'Frankenstein food' and starting to appreciate the health benefits it may bring."

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