



African indigenous foods contain natural compounds that help regulate blood sugar, reduce inflammation and protect the body from chronic disease. PHOTO/Al

Why diabetes fight may lie in Africa's traditional foods

Research shows indigenous African foods can lower inflammation, regulate blood sugar and help fight the growing diabetes crisis.

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For generations, foods such as millet, *malakwang*, bambara nuts and edible insects have been staples in African homes.

Yet many of these foods have gradually disappeared from everyday diets, dismissed as old-fashioned or associated with poverty.

Now, scientific research suggests these same foods may hold powerful health benefits, particularly in fighting inflammation and helping manage Type 2 diabetes.

African indigenous foods contain natural compounds that help regulate blood sugar, reduce inflammation and protect the body from chronic disease. These findings come from a review of 46 scientific studies examining how traditional African foods influence inflammation linked to Type 2 diabetes.

Inflammation is the body's natural defence against injury or infection. It helps initiate healing and protect against harm. However, when inflammation persists over time, it begins to damage healthy tissues, disrupt how the body processes sugar and fat, and

weaken the immune system. This chronic inflammation plays a major role in the development of diseases such as diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes is one of the fastest-growing health challenges worldwide. The number of people living with diabetes increased from 200 million in 1990 to 830 million in 2022. Low- and middle-income countries, including many in Africa, are seeing the sharpest rise. In 2021, diabetes and related kidney disease caused more than two million deaths.

Researchers studying nutrition and functional foods – foods that offer health benefits beyond basic nutrition – have found that many indigenous African foods contain bioactive compounds that reduce inflammation and oxidative stress.

Oxidative stress occurs when harmful molecules overwhelm the body's natural antioxidant defences. This imbalance damages cells, worsens inflammation and contributes to diabetes and other chronic illnesses.

The findings suggest indigenous African foods could play an important role in preventing and managing diabetes, especially in communities where access to expensive medical treatment is limited.

The dangers of abandoning traditional diets

Traditional African diets are rich in cereals, legumes, vegetables, fruits and edible insects, and typically contain less processed food and red meat. These foods provide fibre, antioxidants and plant compounds that

help regulate blood sugar and protect against disease.

However, dietary habits have changed significantly in recent decades. Many people have shifted towards processed foods high in sugar, salt and unhealthy fats. This transition has contributed to rising rates of diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

At the same time, indigenous vegetables such as cowpea leaves, amaranth (*dodo*), nightshade (*nsugga*) and jute mallow (*malakwang*) are increasingly underused despite their proven health benefits.

Research shows that reintroducing these foods into daily diets could help reduce inflammation and improve blood sugar control.

Edible insects

Edible insects, commonly consumed in many parts of Uganda, are rich in nutrients and protective compounds.

Caterpillars, crickets, ants and locusts contain antioxidants, proteins and natural compounds that help reduce inflammatory oxidative stress. Some of these compounds can block enzymes involved in breaking down sugars and fats, helping regulate sugar levels.

Caterpillars, in particular, have been

REDISCOVERING LIFE-SAVING FOODS

As diabetes continues to rise across Africa, indigenous foods offer an affordable and accessible way to improve health.

Unlike expensive specialised diets, these foods are locally available, culturally familiar and nutritionally powerful.

Promoting indigenous foods can help reduce healthcare costs, improve public health and strengthen local farming systems.

They also offer an opportunity to preserve cultural traditions while addressing modern health challenges.